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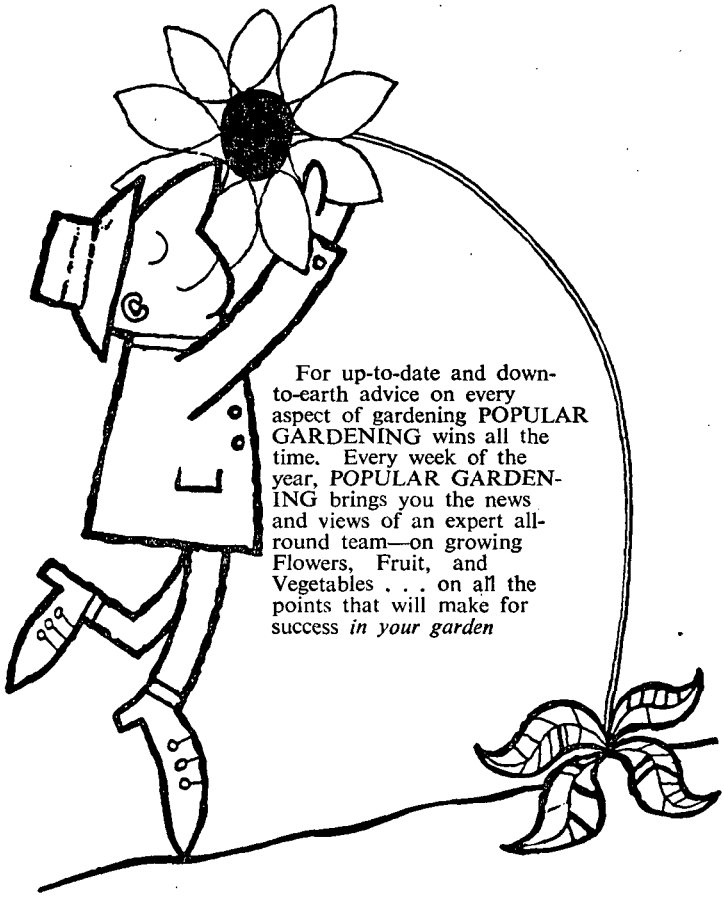

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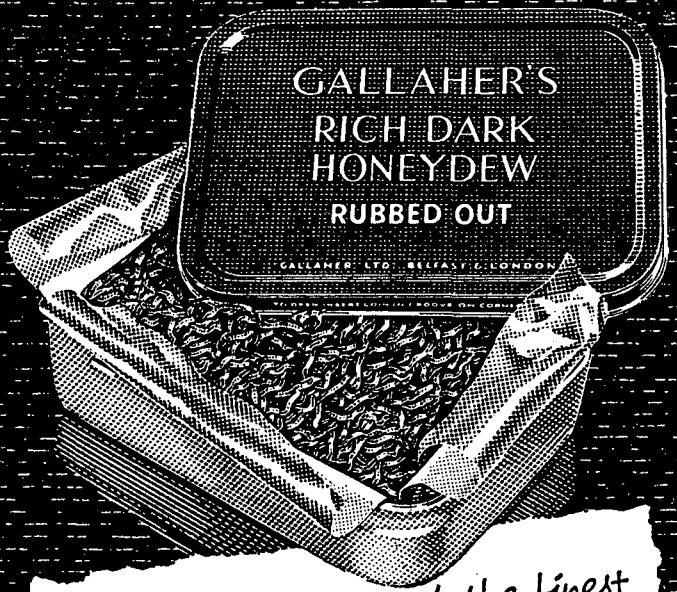

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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

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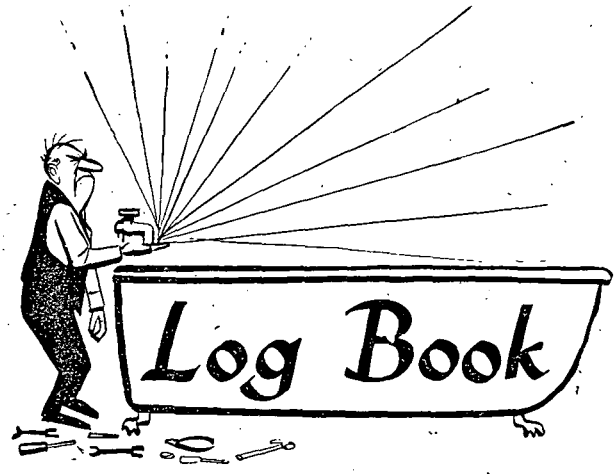

METONYMY, you will recall from your schooldays, is a form of speech in which the part is taken for the whole or the container for the thing contained, like "Lend me your ears," or "The horse came spurring in."

We had occasion to think of this the other day when our bath tap went on strike and vomited out a cascade of torrid water which nothing would stanch. After pliers, hammers, sugar tongs, tweezers, nutcrackers, and the tin-opener had failed to shift the tap covering, we made tracks for the nearest ironmonger, bought a pipe-wrench, and stood gritting our teeth while the worthy tradesman put the wrench in a polythene envelope, the envelope in a wrapper, the wrapper in a box, the box in a substantial covering of brown paper, and tied the whole securely with string. The waste-flow from our bath is considerably slower than the inflow from the tap, and it seemed highly probable that by the time we got back the house and all its inhabitants would be submerged beneath a scalding flood.

As soon as we were outside the ironmonger's we began removing the wrappings; it is a five-minute run, but even so we were back in the bathroom before the last bit of polythene was whipped off.

This incident provoked us into brooding about the Container and the Thing Contained, and the tyranny that Containers exercise on our civilisation.

Take those things that eggs come in, for instance—a highly specialised papier-mâché compartmented sarcophagus with a cunning and exceptionally resistant patent fastening. You would

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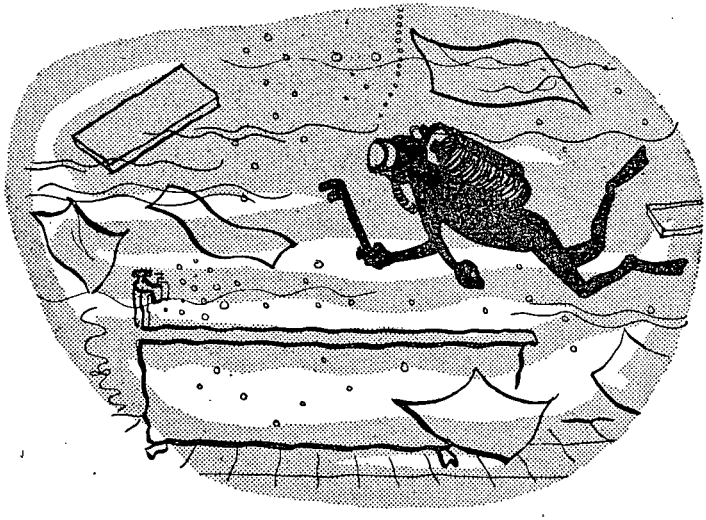
think the milkmen would be pleased to have these elaborate things returned, like milk bottles, but no: they spurn them. A bachelor friend of ours once had seventy-eight egg cases piled up against his bed-sitter wall, and his landlady's cat, in a fit of unjustifiable optimism, one day leapt to the top of the pile. All would have been well had not our friend absentmindedly neglected to eat the contents of the twenty-third container.

If he had been buying eggs in paper bags this would not have happened.

Egg cases, of course, can be used for housing Christmas decorations, or golf balls, but one's need for the former is limited, and golf balls, anyway, come in elaborate containers of their own.

We have friends who are slowly going mad because of the wondrous liqueur bottles, the little plastic cheese-boxes, the squashy fly-sprays, and cylindrical polythene screw-boxes that litter their houses and can't be thrown away. If you buy a shirt nowadays you get two bags, a box, half a dozen pins, some stiffeners, and a coat-hanger thrown in; kippers, instead of being carried home by the tail, must be pried loose from a frantic series of sealed caskets culminating in seventeen layers of newspaper to prevent them from unfreezing on the way home.

The only thing we can think of offhand that doesn't come tediously wrapped, pinned, and sealed is Argosy. See it on any news stand, ask for it, and it's yours; you can put it into your pocket, ready for mental refreshment any time.



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This month we have **H. E. Bates'** new short novel, a knockout drop of comedy and heartbreak; also new stories from **V. S. Pritchett,** well-known caustic literary critic, and **Ray Bradbury** (Bradbury fans will be glad to know that *Fahrenheit* 451, *The Illustrated Man,* and *Golden Apples of the Sun* are all currently available in paperbacks.)

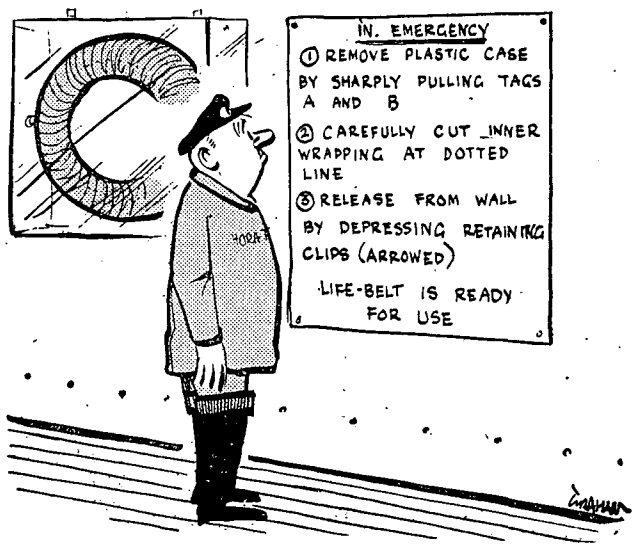
Edmund Gilligan is of Irish descent and Boston environment; he lives in the Catskill mountains and holds the post of Rod 'n' Gun Editor on the *New York Herald Tribune.* In pursuit of his job he therefore also pursues trout, salmon, deer, and antelope. *Sea Bride* is, he thinks, the first tale ever written about the island of St Pierre off Newfoundland.

David Caute, at the age of twenty-three, has already won two literary prizes: the John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize, and the Authors' Club Award. He has now completed a new novel, set in the times of Cromwell, which will come out next year, and he is off to the University of Harvard on a history fellowship in September. He is tall, red-haired, mad about tennis, but leaves some time for rugger and cross-country running. And history and writing.

Hal G. Evarts lives in La Jolla, California. He has been a freelance writer for twenty years, is vice-president of the Western Writers of America.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio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SEA BRIDE

I saw on her left hand a wedding ring
a plain gold band

BY EDMUND GILLIGAN

BECAUSE a vessel may not be unloaded at St Pierre on a Sunday, I had the day to myself and I spent it by taking a walk out to Galantrie Head, where lies the abandoned hamlet once called Galantrie. There the Atlantic tides pass and repass between the French islands and Newfoundland.

Often enough while taking my vessel into St Pierre harbour I had looked at Galantrie, its bone-white walls askew and the falling ruins of salt-scoured shelters for boats long since removed to better fishing grounds. Only one cottage stood sound at the time of my visit. In it Marie Rose had lived all her life.

When I halted on the hill I saw her pacing the wind-rippled beach near her doorway, a tall lone woman gazing out of those ruins and over the sea. In black curves a Breton cloak swirled around her. I gave her a hail, a loud one to carry against the wind and the cries of gulls over her head. When she turned I lifted my cap, and to this salute she bowed.

Although I had heard something about her from time to time, and knew that she lived alone, I had no reason to be sure of a welcome. Yet she looked after me with such keenness that I took good care to pass nearer on my return. I couldn't quite figure out why I should wish to pass the time of day with such an elderly lady. I fancy that her name had again risen far back in my memory, crowded by tales of our Gloucester schooners and Gloucestermen on the Grand Bank and among the islands.

When I saw that she stood between her doorway and her gate and gazed at me directly, I gave her the deep Newfoundland bow from the waist that my grandfather had taught me. He had been the third generation of our family to trade with the French.

She answered in the precise English of the convent school at St Pierre. She glided forward, opened her gate, and made a sign that I should enter. Even so quickly, I discerned that some quality in me had moved her deeply. The onrushing mood of her heart came into her eyes until they became suffused like the eyes of a young woman in the way of lovemaking.

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When I followed into the kitchen, I said to myself, "How very strange! She is stirred by tenderness." I surmised that she might have remembered my grandfather. No, my name had no meaning to her.

She said, " Captain, you are a courteous young man, indeed. It is an event—a true event—in my life when a stranger pauses at my door. I have long been the only inhabitant of Galantrie."

I made a reply concerning her graciousness. She sat prim in an ancient, straightbacked chair that I thought had been made of rosewood. Wine and glasses were set out in my honour, and there were almond cakes from her oven.

The blue day mixed mildly with the sea shadows changing on blue walls and the gleam of blue delf dishes upright on the mantelpiece. Next to a gold-rimmed cup of extraordinary size there lay a tool of our Gloucester fleet: a wooden bailer. On its scoop I read a vessel's name: the *Lark*.

Once more the remembrance of childhood began, and I recalled that in my father's boyhood the *Lark* had come home, her colours at halfmast for a young captain lost in a dory.

And how did it happen, I asked myself, lifting my glass to her, that he left his deck to haul fish in a dory?

My striving memory told a tale of a doryman injured off the French islands. The captain had taken that man's place in the dory. A sundering gale had struck in. The *Lark* had had a brave afternoon of searching for dories.

At nightfall she had found the captain's dorymate clinging to a trawl buoy. The Captain had flung him that buoy and then the gale had driven the dory off into the darkness. I remembered, too, that it had been a greenhorn blunder on the doryman's part that sent him slipping over the side.

" A safe voyage home, Captain." Marie Rose touched her lips to the glass.

It was only then I discovered the rare colour of her eyes—the exact hue of meadow violets; and I recalled more of her. Those eyes had made her a great beauty, according to Armand LeMay, who had been my family's agent on the French island for half a century.

I rose to make my farewell and I looked down at her, discovering traces of her beauty even in the sparse, untinted figure she had become. Her capable hands, long-fingered and reddened by a lifetime of labour, lay in her lap, the left hand quite hidden by the right.

" On my next voyage, madame, may I have the pleasure of bringing you some Boston apples? "

She thanked me; then, seeing my hand held out, she made her

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farewell. On looking after her hand when it was withdrawn, I saw on her left hand a wedding ring, a plain gold band.

She did not look up at me again. No, she kept her eyes on the ring. Upon it now her tenderness played.

When I told Monsieur LeMay of my visit, he said, " Excellently done! You are more and more like your grandfather, Captain, in politeness."

" If it is proper for me to ask, monsieur, isn't it true that Marie Rose has been married? I saw her ring. Where is her husband? "

He sighed in compassion. " It's her fancy—nothing more—that gives her the ring. Ah, the world—the world and love have passed her by, Captain."

" You have never told me enough about her. What had she to do with the *Lark*? I've been trying to remember all this time and now I remember that her captain rowed to some shore through a terrible blizzard."

He told me that he had heard the story long ago from his mother, who had been in the convent school with Marie Rose and had been her good friend for many years. So it was from him, an able talker, I found out that, if the world had passed Marie Rose by, love had not.

Long before I was born Marie Rose stood one noontime in her doorway, searching the sea for her father's sloop returning.

Winter had come early. Already there had been a gale, a harsh blow out of the east driving hail and making ice. All the vessels had kept snug in St Pierre harbour. The vessels working on the Newfoundland coast had taken shelter and they were keeping in it because the gale had not really blown itself out. There were signs that the storm would come scudding out again from the caverns of Langlade, the island lying in the east.

Her father's vessel had tied up safely in Fortune Bay of Newfoundland. Because there was no way for her to learn those good tidings until the sloop itself appeared, she had her anxious hours. For some years she and her father were the only people left in the hamlet; therefore, she could not expect that another vessel or a neighbour might come by with the news that she desired.

" Ah, it will blow again! "

She spoke of the gale. At the time, she was nearly thirty years old and had long since become seawise, accustomed to the Atlantic and its changes. She knew well the work of the coasting vessels and could sit to the oars as well as any man. Now that she had read the signs of the gale to come, her anxiety for her

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father waned. She knew he would never venture out of shelter until the storm had passed for good.

Her dog came up to take a caress. Of the Newfoundland breed, black and thick-coated, the dog helped the family in much of its work. He had been trained in the usual way to draw a light cart. The leather harness lay snug over his chest and shoulders.

In the migrating seasons of waterfowl, when the wild goose fell before her father's gun, the dog showed much skill in retrieving birds from the hurrying tide. Also he kept guard at night and called her when her father came down the path, lantern in hand, after his trading voyages.

The dog followed her when she set about her chores. She cleared away the shallow drifts of snow blown to her doorstep by the easterly; and she carried into the kitchen the coal and wood for her stove. During that time the wind off the sea chilled her so much that she returned to the cottage and there changed her woollen skirt for woollen trousers and the thick-soled boots of the sea trades. By noontime, the sands of the shore glowed so pleasantly that she walked there a while, the dog romping in and out of the sea.

Marie Rose spied a tramp seal in the green breakers. Those adventurers amused her. Self-exiled from the herds of the north, such vagrants revealed much interest in life ashore. They respectfully returned greetings by bobbing up and down and would often swim a mile along the beach to gain another wave of her hand. Sometimes she thought they seemed like schoolmasters, becomingly bald and whiskers drooping, their eyes requiring an answer to a profound question.

Abruptly, and with no politeness at all, the seal slid beneath the waves.

In searching for him in a casual sweep of the sea yonder, she saw a boat under sail—perhaps a dory. It appeared to be taking advantage of the flood tide to make a swift passage from Newfoundland to St Pierre. Marie Rose paid small heed to it. Indeed, in the time it took her to retrace her way down the beach to her home she did not again look out to sea.

At her doorstep she stayed a while to take more of the sun because it had been hidden for so many days by the gale and was now likely to vanish again. She saw the sailing dory. It had come nearer. This change surprised her because it had been on a course that should have carried it nearly out of sight, much closer to Dog Island and the inward passage to the harbour.

"How strangely she sails!"

For a time the dory steered straight towards her. Because of this alteration, which might have revealed an intent to come ashore

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there, she walked down the path to the well house. There in its shadow she awaited the stranger's arrival.

The dory had now come close enough for her to see that it was neither a French boat nor one made in Newfoundland. No, its sides were higher than the sides of such craft and it had a kind of massiveness created by the forceful way it rode the seas, neither yielding lightly to the tide rips nor faltering when a breaker burst against the blunt bow.

A sun-streaked squall harrowed the sea and struck against the dory. Its sail blew up and flapped in and out of curves of spray. This new change sent the dory veering off, plainly out of control. The tide took hold of the dory, flung it back into a boisterous tide rip, and the rip flung foam and black water over the gunwales.

"But there is no man in it!"

She called her dog and, pointing to the distant dory, bade him watch over it until she returned. He understood this order clearly. He walked gravely to a dune near the well house and sat there, his deep-lighted amber eyes fixed on the dory. He carried himself in sombre fashion and now and then lifted his right paw in a gesture towards the sea.

At the cottage Marie Rose took a sea glass—the long telescope of those times—out of its case and, her back against the cottage wall, she trained the glass on the horizon. She brought it slowly down until she found the image of the dory. A man's head appeared above the gunwale. Dimly she saw his yellow storm hat and under its brim his eyes gazing, not at her or the shore but in a curious downward look into the flow of ice and foam.

Even so far, and coming from a stranger in yellow oil clothing, the eyes signalled an appeal to Marie Rose, one that she could not understand. She lost the image. When she searched it out again, the face had vanished. The dory had swung all the way round again. Ice knocked at its sides.

Her dog had counted all these changes. He came closer to her side and stood nigh, his eyes set on the dory. Whatever were the images taken in by the dog, they kept him uneasy. A growl rumbled in his chest; he kept tossing his head, a sign to her that he was trying to see more.

"Jean," she said, "it is a living man, a stranger."

She kept her glass fixed on the dory. It seemed likely that there might soon be an explanation of its actions, something to quiet the fear in her heart. A cry of relief parted her lips. The man out there had done something that assured her; his arm

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appeared in a motion three times repeated. Three times the yellow sleeve glittered in the sun, now long past its noon.

"He is bailing her."

This conjecture soon ceased to satisfy her heart. Three heaves of a bailer meant nothing. Her sea knowledge proved that the dory had not shipped enough water to endanger it. Moreover, the sail kept thrashing, a shattered wing snapping into the blue. No man would risk his sail to clear a little water.

His next action told her more of his condition. He rose to his height in the dory and by clinging to the mast held himself up. He bent far backwards, his face upturned, his arm rigid in a gesture that seemed one of anger or of appeal to the sky. The sail whipped down and wrapped him.

Marie Rose saw him immobile in that canvas prison; only his white-gloved fist stayed thrust, now against the black water, now against the blue sky. The sail unwound itself and blew away in two skeinlike parts, all tatters. The man's back gave a number of flashes, these from sunlight across his yellow jacket. After that, he lunged awkwardly forward and once again vanished under the gunwales.

"Dear God, he has fallen!"

Before ever she stirred from her place she swept the sea with her telescope, hoping to find another sign of life on that glassy swell. She saw nothing except the dory turning.

She had no time to seek help elsewhere. Indeed, considering the nature of the task so abruptly thrust upon her, she required no other help than time and strength enough to struggle against the tides and to escape the returning gale. She had been to the hard school and had the skill to carry out her rescue. Moreover, she had her dog, a vigorous, intelligent animal stronger than herself.

Between the well house and the high watermark a boat lay on its side, its oars under the slanted thwart. She ran to it and righted it with one full heave of her body. At her signal, the dog stood by for the tying of the boat painter to his harness.

She shouted, "Jean! Go!"

He lunged forward, his paws spurting sand, his claws taking good hold. Crying out her signal again and again, she heaved with him until the boat slid into the sea. She drew the rope out of his harness and, calling him in, sat to the oars. She began to row strongly against wind and tide.

By chance of wind and tide, the stranger's dory changed course and sailed directly towards her, gliding forcefully up the seas and plunging hard. In quick glances over her shoulder Marie Rose saw the distance closing swiftly.

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She bore to windward to make their meeting smoother. Her boat ran too far that way, so that she passed the dory at such angle she could not look into it. Backing her port oar, she turned her boat with the wind and in a few strokes lay alongside the dory, her hand holding to its gunwale.

Face down in a slush of hail and brine, the man lay sprawled. By striking out with his right hand, he kept trying to lift his head out of the water that lapped upon the bottom boards. He seemed unable to do anything with his legs.

She shouted, " Hold on! Hold on! "

She made the painter fast to the dory thwart and slid over the gunwales to his side. She passed her arms under his. In a fierce strain of thighs and legs, she heaved him forward half his length. She turned him over on his back and held his head between her hands.

Now she saw what he was: a man of her age, a ruin of frostbite, hunger, and of immense strength poured out against the gale that had darkened her windows. She struck away the slush freezing on his mouth. She cleared the closed eyes of frost; and then, fearful that he had died, she tore open his jacket and thrust her hand through his woollen shirts until she found his heart beating mildly to her touch. Even beneath all the folds of wool, her fingers encountered frost.

He spoke to somebody far away, to a doryman, pleading, " Greenhorn or not—I go with him! Can't spare a dory now."

Despite the violence of his thought, his voice quavered like the voice of an old man, boastful in a dream of manhood. He tried to make a gesture to back up his words. His hands failed. He had spoken in English, yet not in the manner to which Marie Rose was used.

She bent over him. " Can you hear me? "

He sighed. He let his head fall gently against her knee, either in peace or in the loss of all consciousness.

She straddled the thwart and, by heaving with all her strength, she drew him nearer the bow where his wooden bailer lay. Burnt into its scoop, she read the word *Lark*. She thrust it under his head.

She took up the dory's painter and tied it to her boat, which she entered and began to row. The tide, coming to slack water, made her task easier. She towed the dory to the beach below her home.

The dory could not be handled. It was all she could do to tip it slightly so that his body turned nearer the gunwale, where she stood over her boots in the tide. She had to rest. Fear had tapped her heart and her strength. She stared down at the enigma of his face.

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The winter evening began to flow over it. Long shadows of the evening waned. Beyond the outer islands, lighthouses began to flash; and the bellbuoys, heaved now by the ebbing tide and a rising wind, clanged another note, keener and faster. Over far Langlade the grey became black, foretelling the quick coming of the gale.

She had not the power to lift the man. Yet she had to do it. Already a new frost laced his storm hat. Again placing her arms under his, she drew him to the gunwale; then, marshalling all her force, she dragged him over the side. He slid heavily into the water.

"Oh no! No!" This time he spoke in such weariness that it seemed to her he could never speak again; and yet at once his lips opened in a sigh so piteous that she cried out wildly in answer. Cleaving the sea noises of a tide splashing on shores of rock, her cry became a wail.

The dog took this cry for a summons and ran through the water to raise his paw to her. She took off the rope from the boat and harnessed the dog to the man's shoulders. She passed the rope round and round the man's waist. She held him by the arms and shouted to her dog.

By one unbroken pull in tandem, the dog straining at her heels, they dragged the man all the way up the beach; past the well house and to her door. She opened it and, joining the dog again, drew the man into the kitchen. That room was warmed by a coal fire in the stove.

She pulled off his boots. Spurts of water came out of them. This dismayed her because it meant that boots and oil clothing had failed and his feet had been in chilling brine all this time, making the danger of frostbite even worse. Therefore she bathed his feet in warm water and rubbed them with her hands until a faint ruddiness appeared.

Out of her oven she took two bricks that always lay there in winter for the purpose she now required of them. She wrapped them in flannel squares and placed them close to the man's feet. She then removed all his outer clothing.

When she unbuttoned the chinstrap of his storm hat, thus revealing his forehead and close-cropped curly hair, she saw that his hair had much the same colour as her own. His stubble beard, days old, seemed not red at all, it was so dark. Because of a deep line on either side of his bluntish nose and another between his eyebrows, he had the look of a much older man, one of middle age, worn by sea toil and sea cares.

"Sir, sir?" He made no sign.

Against the nightfall she lighted two lamps and again knelt

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by him. She bent far down and studied his closed eyes. Under the lids, inflamed by frost, his eyeballs moved in spasms.

She made tea, sugared it well, and put rum into it. She fed him with a spoon. At the touch, his lips opened so eagerly that the first portion went down well, and yet after the second spoonful she saw no swallowing action. She had to rub his throat briskly before she marked the passage of the liquid.

She held off. He had tried to lift his left arm and had failed. In response to the break of famine and thirst, he cried out clearly and without distress, " My vessel! Is she safe? Answer me! "

She did not think that he actually knew what he was saying or that he could receive an answer. She made none.

Even so far gone, he had something on his mind—a great fear. It forced him to repeat his thought, this time in such a pleasing, calm tone that she answered boldly, wishing to comfort him, even at the cost of a falsehood. " Your vessel is standing off and on the headland. She is safe, Captain."

She wiped his forehead and his mouth.

Either her words or her soothing hands sent a meaning to his searching heart. He let his head go gently to one side. He began to breathe naturally, no longer striving to take in gulps of air. He raised his right hand to his throat and fumbled at a leather cord there. He soon gave this up.

Marie Rose tried to give him more drink. She didn't succeed because he wouldn't open his mouth. A little later, in a voice that waned at once to a whisper, he said, " I am her skipper. John Darmody of the *Lark*. Gloucester. Let that be remembered. Do you hear me there? "

She answered, " Aye, Captain! All of us hear you. Have no fear, sir."

" Fear! " She had for once made a clear communication to him. This word came scornfully from his lips, and the scorn twisted his lips into severity.

Resuming the calm voice that had comforted her, he said, " I'd like to know just what there is to fear. I would, indeed."

The establishment of thought between them raised her hopes greatly and she kept them so, even when he again refused to admit the liquid. He responded by a change in his breathing to such a hoarse rattling that her heart became faint with renewed fear.

In trying to force his left hand away from an awkward position, she found it icy and inflexible. This was her first certain knowledge that frost and famine had stricken him so deeply in those days and nights on the Grand Bank or the Green, wherever he had been lost from his schooner. She uncovered his feet.

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Warmth from the enfolded bricks floated through her fingers, yet his feet had yielded to the paralysing chill.

"Do you hear me, Captain?"

Because she knelt by him, the intense cold of the earth, working through the floor, began to hurt her knees. She could no longer let him lie there. Unable to carry him to a bed, she brought the bed to him, one from her own room, squeaking on castors. After struggling long against his unyielding body, she placed him between the sheets and covered him again.

Night had drifted over Galantrie Head. The unspent gale had risen. Sleet scraped at the windows. At times snow fell so thickly that flakes slid melting down the kitchen panes. Far away the breakers repeated the throbbing, cavernous melody that told of ice floes pushing in from the east. The wind frightened her. Yet it had been her lullaby.

Now, for the first time, his eyes opened. They closed so quickly that she couldn't see their colour. This brief access of strength created in him another fancy, a dream of such a nature that his empty expression changed to one of intensity.

"What vessel is that? Oh, I can't hear him! What's he saying, chum?"

Even in his delirium, he sought an answer. He repeated his questions and turned his head sideways as if he was actually scanning the sea.

Employing the name of her father's vessel, Marie Rose replied in loud, pretended cheerfulness, "'Tis the *Mathilde* out of St Pierre, Captain. Aye, 'tis her. Now she signals, ALL IS WELL."

His question had been ably said. Her answer had no effect except the opening of his eyes, not in a lively way but in a drowsiness. This hid any meaning that she might have found if his gaze had been directed towards her. He looked dreamily at nothing. The pupils of his eyes each held images of lamps. Upon the grey irises, night floated, whirled.

In an action that surprised her by its smoothness, he again reached into his sweater. This time he drew up the leather cord. A tiny pouch of green leather came to the edge of his sweater and fell outwards rather heavily.

A new intensity marked his next words. He made a plea. "Mary!" And, "Oh, my darling, give me your hand. Ah, how long it has been, Mary!" He held out his hand in the pleading.

Marie Rose gazed at it. Soon her tears, no longer to be held back, hid the hand from her sight. When he whispered the name again, she placed her left hand in his grasp.

His hard fingers embraced her hand entirely. His eyes closed; once more a degree of gentleness stayed on his mouth. A change

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came. His breathing increased in force. He began to breathe roughly through his mouth. This soon subsided.

Marie Rose tried to spoon the liquid into his mouth. She could not. She cried out to him. An uproar of the gale beat against the door and windows so loudly that he couldn't hear her. Nor did he perceive the gale. Even when the cottage shook, he lay in seeming peace.

She began to pray that help might come, although she knew that the only help lay miles away in the town of St Pierre. It now seemed possible to her longing heart that her father might have made the crossing and might come to her. Yet she was aware that, even for him, the roads and paths to Galantrie were long since drifted over and difficult to pass. Nevertheless, she wished for the welcoming bark of her dog lying outside the door. In the end she understood there were no reasons for such hopes. She bent over the young captain.

He began fumbling at the drawstring of the pouch. His failure made him complain fretfully. " Oh dear! Oh, what luck! "

When he failed the third time, Marie Rose opened the pouch for him. He reached into it, and with a deftness that again surprised her he took out something wrapped in a delicate blue paper. His hand passed over the object, surrounded it; and he held it closely to him.

He had to make keener efforts to follow the bidding of his far-inward thought. The line between his eyebrows deepened and a set of wrinkles came skeining across his forehead.

" Mary. Come close to me, dear. Oh, the time has come, thank God! "

He laughed in delight; yet no pleasure appeared in his eyes. They stayed blank. By a sudden enclosure of her in his right arm, he drew her down to him and, again in a laughing way, he said something about lips and breasts that caused her to flush and turn her eyes from him. He would not let her go, or he could not, so strong was his delusion. He held her even closer and at last brought her mouth to his. So they kissed; and the man and his kiss seemed very sweet to Marie Rose, who had had no other kiss of love.

Soon, in that passionate embrace, she felt his arm weakening on her shoulder. He had strength only for whispering, " Don't leave me, Mary."

And she answered, " I will never leave you, John." After speaking so, she kissed him and kissed in haste.

Now a solemn vision stirred him gently, and his eyes closed and opened again. " Aye! " he whispered in contentment, as if the vision contained the summertime and apple blossoms at home,

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and a bell chiming amid the song of redwinged blackbirds near a garden where he stood, and his white-gowned Mary advancing to him on the arm of her father.

More than ever gentled, he drew Marie Rose to him and said, " I love you, Mary. And I always will."

Marie Rose laid her hand on his forehead and kissed his frost-broken lips and answered, " I love you, John. And I always will."

He held her hand. His empty eyes staring away, he drew a wedding ring out of the blue paper by the last effort of his left hand. He placed it on her finger. He carried her hand to his lips and kissed the ring.

" Oh," he said clearly, fondly, " oh, Mary, I am so happy now!"

Thereupon he turned his head towards the sea window, where the gale clanged in its darkness.

After a time Marie Rose folded his arms across his breast and closed his eyes. She knelt by the bed and she prayed for the repose of his soul and she prayed for his Mary in Gloucester far away. She continued her supplications until day broke.

This is why Marie Rose made a certain answer when bolder visitors, seeing her ring revealed, inquired, " Ah, madame has been married? "

And Marie Rose replied, " For a very little while. A long, long time ago."

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* * *

GRAND SELAM

The art of Writing is not general among the Turks; and when they are in love with a person to whom they cannot have easy access, they have a mode of writing their sentiments without pen, ink, or paper, by the means of flowers, fruits, woods, silks, stuffs, and colours, of which they make a packet: this packet they call a *selam*. Thus—

An ambret signifies, We are both of one mind.

A piece of rose-bush, I weep continually, but you deride my tears.

A piece of cloth, I am tired with your importunities.

A looking-glass, I am ready to sacrifice myself to you.

A pistol, I love you very much.

A grain of a raisin, some blue silk, a pea, a morsel of sugar, and a piece of the wood of aloes, arranged in certain order, form a billet doux to this purpose: " My heart, I am in love with you. The pain which my love occasions me has nearly deprived me of my senses, my heart passionately desires you. Give my disease the necessary remedy."

THE MAIDS, WIVES, AND WIDOWS' PENNY MAGAZINE, 1832

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DEAD RINGER

" He put me in mind of your friend," said the landlord

BY YOUNGMAN CARTER

YOU can't mistake an angry man for a human being in any other mood. This particular example was clearly just about to smash my jaw for me, which would be most unseemly conduct in the back office of an expensive art gallery, especially one which is only just off Bond Street.

Charles Wisbeck jutted his face much too close to mine, so that I could see he had all the signs—white nostrils, twitching muscles, and two little spots of colour on his cheekbones. He is one of those artists with a " damn-you-get-out-of-my-way-I'm-special " look anyway, very attractive to some women, I've noticed.

" Now just what in hell do you think you're up to? " he said. " And the story had better be good."

This was the moment to play for extra time. He was beaded with cold sweat and there was a dribble of saliva at the corner of his mouth. I slid my chair back beyond the reach of his fist, and put on my discreetly polished manner.

In my smoothest executive voice I said, " What's the trouble, Charlie? It's two months since I've seen you. I've just sold four of your best canvases for a lot of money. Goldropwasser is interested in you as a possible successor to Picasso and you come in here as if you were prepared to wreck the joint."

He lowered his head like a bull about to charge. " You know very well what the trouble is. It's that canvas in the window. Here am I just about to make your fortune, and you have the blazing insolence to display a damned imitator of my stuff."

" You're off the beam, you know," I said. " The man in the window is an entirely separate painter—not copy merchant, but a chap working along your line of thought, which is nobody's copyright. The painting has been on view for a fortnight and nobody—yet—has offered to smash our valuable plate glass. Except you. What," I repeated, " is wrong with the painting? "

Charles drew a deep breath, like a man preparing to lift a ton of lead with his bare hands.

" I'll show you—precisely—what is wrong with it," he said,

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and the words came slowly in awkward jerks out of his mouth. "Look at this."

He had come into my tiny office in such a flurry that I had not noticed the parcel under his arm. He now picked it up, sweeping the brown paper away from its contents with an erratic hand.

It was a landscape in his best style, the paint still fresh and informing the nostrils with the tang of oil and studios which I still find exciting. He placed it very carefully on the chair, bang in front of my desk.

There was a long pause: I trying to think of a decent man-to-man escape route, and he almost enjoying his own fury.

"Well, what about it?" he said at last, and in the tone of a strong man about to filch your last cigarette on a desert island.

The canvas on the chair, a typical Wisbeck study, was unfortunately almost identical with the painting which had been in my window for two whole weeks, signed Andrew MacDermot. It was so like a Charlie Wisbeck—I admitted secretly—as to be asking for trouble.

I must now make my own position clear, because I knew very well just the kind of trouble to be expected, especially since he is supposed to be a friend of mine.

Charles, as you may know, is one of our best new painters; a man who can mix this ultra-modern abstract stuff—which I frankly don't understand—with strong factual representation. For example, if he was to paint Waterloo Bridge you would certainly recognise it, yet it would be so oddly presented that, looked at from a purely outside viewpoint, it might well be a pattern in oilpaint of the most advanced type—splashes and bicycle tyre prints and what are called incidentals all over the place.

There his painting sat on my chair, blazing with half-dry colour, the exact replica of the thing in the window.

Something had to be done to break the suffocating silence.

"Look, Charlie," I said. "My partner, Robin, discovered this new man. I warned him that the chap was painting very much in your style."

I knew this was the understatement of the century, but to my surprise Charles became almost human. With infinite care in the selection of words, coupled with the tolerance one seeks to extend to a very stupid child—instead of hitting him sharply across the face—he spoke.

"Now listen to me, Philip. You know and I now know that by some freak of malice you have displayed in your window a painting by a man who is copying my style to the last detail of thought. This stinking thief has so wormed himself into my

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mind that he has filched my unborn ideas. Now you have the proof in front of you. This canvas of mine, finished only a week —two days—ago, was copied by a man stealing my ideas, my style, my whole thought process. And— " here he thumped my beautiful desk very rudely—" before I'd even painted the damn picture myself. Now explain that to me, you oily commercial and illegitimate middleman."

There was no escape, particularly if I was to avoid a couple of black eyes. I decided to play my hand—a pretty poor one—with as much bluff and bafflegab as I could command. I pressed the onyx bell on my desk, and when little Elaine my secretary, who is also a very fine " front of the house " girl, appeared, I said with a splendidly casual air, " Miss Simpson, would you bring me that Andrew MacDermot landscape from the front window and also his two unframed canvases from the storeroom."

Neither Charles nor I spoke while she performed this job, and I was glad of the pause because once again it gave me time to think. At last the three canvases stood side by side against the wall while Charles' own new painting still squatted ominously on the chair. All four obviously—as it seemed—came from the same palette, and two of them were as alike as a couple of peas. The situation called for very expert handling.

" Charles," I said at last. " I can't really explain this. I can only tell you the truth." This was the phrase I had thought out. Now came the difficult part. " This fellow MacDermot showed his work to my partner Robin two months ago. They'd met at some pub in Chelsea. Robin brought one or two of his things to me a week or so later, and I of course said, ' These aren't by MacDermot, whoever he may be, they're by Wisbeck or some fellow copying him so cleverly as makes no difference.' "

" And so? " said Charlie, flexing both fists in a most unpleasant manner and placing them upon my desk so that I should not lose the thread of the argument.

" And so," I continued, " I suggested we have nothing to do with this new chap, who was clearly just a copyist. But Robin—and after all he is my partner—made me listen to him, just as you must, Charles. This man MacDermot had never seen a painting of yours in his life. Until very recently he'd never even heard your name. He was born in Brussels of Scottish stock, his father was an international lawyer, and he learnt his painting in . . . "

But Charles was not listening. He was squatting on his haunches staring at one of the pictures signed MacDermot. Then he tipped it forward so that he could see the pegs stretching the canvas at the back.

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" The bastard," he said. " The infernal fiend! This canvas has been cut down on two sides to make it compose better which is exactly what I did yesterday to the same painting which is now in my studio. But this is the damned part of it. You see that sort of whorl of loose paint in this corner? That's not on my canvas yet—but I made up my mind in bed last night to put it there. Damn it, I only thought it up in bed at two o'clock this morning. What the hell am I going to do, Philip? This is the straight road to lunacy."

Now that worry was replacing anger with him, I felt safe enough to come out with the final piece of information.

" Robin says . . ." I began gingerly. " Mind you, I haven't seen this fellow myself—but Robin says that apart from his beard you're extremely like him. In fact he says he thought it *was* you playing a joke when he met him.

" If you and I hadn't been fishing in Scotland at the time, I think he'd have believed he was being tricked somehow or other. Same voice, he says, same even temper, charm of manner, and so on. It was just at the end of last season. He was so rattled he rang me up and then insisted on talking to you on some footling pretext, just to see if you were really there. You may remember it."

Charles straightened himself very slowly. Then he picked up his own canvas and held it above his head as if he was about to smash it. His arm stayed up a long time. Then, abruptly, he replaced the picture on the chair.

" No," he said. " That's not the way. I must see this fellow myself. You'd better take me to him. It's your problem as well as mine, you know."

Now this sort of decision is more easily taken than carried out. Mr. MacD. was, it proved, an elusive character, and since Charles insisted on my presence a date had to be found when I could spare time away from the gallery.

We had a card from North Wales saying only: *Two canvases for you by rail. Moving on. A. MacD.* which was no great help. A fortnight later he wrote, with no address, from Cheshire. At his Chelsea rooms there was no forwarding arrangement and a heap of mail accumulated—a fact I discovered for myself by hanging about the place for the best part of a day before I located an obliging charwoman.

By now it was late autumn and I hoped our man would be running out of money, for a quite respectable sum stood to his credit with us. Finally another postcard—he favoured highly-coloured photographs taken in 1910—arrived with the simple message: *I shall spend winter here—The Tithe Barn, Market*

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Gedgeworth, Suffolk. Send me all you've collected in pound notes. A. MacD.

Charles and I left London the next afternoon, a Friday, in my car, which was uncomfortably small for a nervous driver and a gloomy man in a temper. He had changed quite a lot in the last two months and had worked hardly at all. My little Elaine, an openly adoring admirer, reported having seen him the worse for wear in several hostelries in her area, and I knew she would be the last girl to let a situation like that go by without attempting some practical personal rescue work. Her own pert irritability in my office told me more about her failure than the occasional scraps of information she offered.

It was dark when we reached the large straggling and hopelessly picturesque Suffolk village, once an important centre in the Tudor wool industry, and the one inn, The Woolpackers' Arms, was clearly not used to casual trade at that season and not prepared to put itself out for our encouragement. There was only one guest-room, we discovered, a fact the landlord had not mentioned in our telephone discussion, but it proved to be a large L-shaped room with a bath leading off—an apartment which also opened dangerously into the corridor—and two reasonably distant beds.

These domestic details increased Charles' lowering mood. He flung himself on the farther bed and said, "You suit yourself. I'll see you in the bar sometime. We'll find this so-and-so in the morning."

It was about seven in the evening, chilly, with quite a thick mist building up outside. The house was warm enough but it was a nonentity of a hole, all varnish and Victoriana, "ripe for development" as the advertisements say. There was no lounge: the staircase led into a largish hall with a bar-in one corner. It was silent and poorly lit, but a man was standing by it with his back to me.

He did not move as I approached but stood unnervingly still against what light there was. I had to walk right round him, making it quite clear that I intended to see his face.

It was a very frightening minute before either of us spoke and I suppose I stared directly at him with my mouth wide open.

"I'm Andrew MacDermot," he said at last. "Have you brought the money?"

Even his voice was so like Charles' that I think my face must have gone green. My hair began to feel coarse and unnatural and I knew it was starting out of my head. The likeness was so horrible that I find difficulty in describing it. It was deeper than the likeness of twins, deeper than skin or superficialities of hair

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and colour. This was Charles all over again and in the same ominous mood that meant storms ahead. I held out my envelope full of cash and offered it to him.

"You—you've shaved off your beard," I muttered, knowing it made no sense. " I was told you were— "

" It's no business of yours," he said, " I haven't had a beard for six months. Just give me the cash and go to hell for all I care. Unless—" Suddenly he turned full on me, the image of the furious Charles in my office. " Unless the fellow who came with you this evening is—well, who the devil is he, anyway? "

There was a pause, quite involuntary on my part because my mouth was so dry no sound came from it.

A voice in the shadows by the staircase said, " His name is Wisbeck," and Charles came into the lamplight and stood between us.

I am a selfish man, a timid man, and it is beyond me to describe this moment except from my own point of view. It was quite terrifyingly unpleasant. I remember looking at Charles and thinking, He has ugly fingernails, they need cutting and the rims are full of paint—and turning to the other man whose hands were cast in that very mould.

With extraordinary mildness, for I had expected an explosion, the man called MacDermot said, " By God, you're the man in my dream. I see you nearly every night, walking . . . walking . . . walking . . ."

" In sand," said Charles in that even tone. " Walking across a desert. I walked from Benghazi to Tobruk. And you've not got away with it as easily as that, for I see you too. Sitting on your backside day after day behind barbed wire. And there's nothing to draw on except the backs of prison orders; nothing to draw with unless you make ink out of blood and brushes from human hair. Now will you please get to hell out of my life and out of my dreams."

With that he turned and almost ran out of the room, a sort of lumbering trot as if he was drunk.

The landlord appeared from somewhere behind the scenes and without asking what the other man wanted I ordered two pints of bitter and two double whiskies, Charles' invariable tipple. We drank in silence as if it was the most natural thing in the world, requiring no comment.

Finally MacDermot put his tankard down on the oaken bar and spoke as if it were a summing-up.

" It's so damned insulting," he said. " All your life you have nothing really, but yourself. You are real. You are you. You

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are unique. You paint, write, compose, or make little bits for motor cycles. It doesn't matter a damn because all the time you have the secret satisfaction of being you.

" And now quite suddenly you find you're not alone—there's some other wretched swine just like you, thinking your thoughts, painting your stuff—not anything better but just the same bloody stuff out of your private imagination. It's insulting. Do you see what I'm talking about, you filthy middleman? "

I had to say yes and I had no courage to argue or defend myself.

" I suppose," he said, speaking almost to himself, " that it was bound to happen. How many codfish in a cod's roe? Does every blasted codfish think the same things, feel the same way? Doesn't the poor brute have any private entity of his own? I feel dirty—humiliated—useless. I won't stand for it. Do you understand that lot? "

" Yes," I said again.

" And I shall now get drunk," he finished. " But not in your infernal company."

With that he turned his back on me and walked out slamming the outer door. Only a wisp of mist that crept in as he went hovered around for a moment to show he had ever been there at all.

" A rum bloke," said the landlord. " Only been here a fortnight. Artist or something, they say. He put me in mind of your friend. Brothers perhaps? "

A storm got up in the night and rocked the old house as if it had been a ship. In the morning Charles and I drove back to town in teeming rain and barely spoke to each other. Nothing had been solved, nothing settled, and it was quite beyond my thin store of courage to raise the subject at all. I dropped him very nearly without a word in St. John's Wood, just outside his studio.

A week went by, seven slow uneasy days which became increasingly sinister because nothing happened at all except the perpetual irritation of routine events.

Then one morning, indecently early, two men appeared in my office.

" They're detectives," said the white-faced Elaine. " C.I.D.—Scotland Yard, you know. They want to see you."

They were really remarkably human and very polite.

" We understand, sir," said the shorter of the two, " that you spent the night of the 13th—a Friday, oddly enough—at Market Gedgeworth in Suffolk." He looked and spoke like a high-power insurance salesman, just missing the big business style.

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I admitted the truth of it and inquired as mildly as I dared why he asked.

"Well, of course you'll want to know that," he said. "Of course. The facts are very simple and we usually say, 'This is just a routine inquiry,' but it's a little bit more than that, to be honest.

"The fact is, a man was found dead in a pond down there on Tuesday morning. He'd been there about three days, we think. At first they thought he'd fallen in after having a drink or two, but now it looks rather more serious. He was an artist, we understand, a Mr. MacDermot. Did you know him?"

"Yes," I said, "I knew him. I saw him—in fact I went down to see him—on that Friday evening."

"Well, now of course I must ask you why," said the policeman evenly.

I explained that we sold his paintings and owed him money which I had gone down to pay in cash, £296, to be precise.

"Ah, yes indeed," said my smiling visitor. "No trouble there. We found it all. Now when did you see him last?"

I told him as near as I knew at about half past seven in the evening.

"And the man with you," said the policeman suddenly, looking me right in the eyes. "What was he doing all this time?"

I did the best I could, speaking slowly but trying desperately to avoid sounding as if I was making a prepared statement.

"Charles Wisbeck," I explained, "is merely a friend who went down there with me. He happens to be a painter too, another artist whom we represent. He did not know Mr. MacDermot before and even when they met they had less than ten minutes' conversation. When MacDermot left, Charles and I had dinner —a very poor dinner by the way—and went to bed early. It was a noisy stormy night."

The policeman looked at some notes in a folio. "You shared the only guest-room at the pub with Mr. Wisbeck?"

"There was no alternative."

"Of course, of course. And neither of you went out that night?"

"Certainly not. It was a beastly night as I've just said."

He flung one of his quick ones at me.

"Sleep well?"

"I don't think I slept at all," I said. "That old pub is full of timber that creaks in the wind. I don't like strange beds and that one was damned uncomfortable."

"I see, I see," he said, tapping a pencil against his teeth.

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" And so very wisely neither of you went out and you spent the entire night within sight of each other. Couldn't have a better alibi even if you needed one, could you? " Almost to himself he went on, " Of course, with a flat roof just outside that smaller window and only a six-foot drop after that a man could— But that's nonsense, just plain nonsense, isn't it now? "

Turning directly to me again he said, " Now tell me about this poor fellow MacDermot, who was dead, by the way, before he got himself into that pond—fractured skull, you know. Quite a painter, wasn't he? Make a lot of money for you? "

" He might have made us a very nice income for many years," I explained. " I scarcely knew him personally, but he'll be a pretty sharp loss."

" Well, it looks as if that was just about that, eh? " said the policeman. " Now I'll just take a formal statement from you if you don't mind and then we'll stop taking up your time and space."

Within a quarter of an hour the two of them were gone, and without so much as the lift of an eyebrow to suggest whether they believed me or no. But whatever they thought privately it was the end of the trail for them. Andrew MacDermot had died, it was decided, by misadventure.

Whatever the truth, the fact is that I have a very nasty piece of perjury on my conscience, but what is a poor art dealer—with enormous overheads—to do? Must he lose one good painter by murder and another by imprisonment for life, in one single evening? It is asking too much of any businessman, especially when a little diplomacy will save at least half the cargo from the wreck.

For Charles did go out that night. He did go out by the window when he thought I was asleep, and he did come back in the very small hours soaked to the skin by the same odd route.

Or did he come back? I'm damned if I know. Certainly one of the two returned. But which? Twice, now that it is all over, I've taken whoever it is out to lunch, but I'm none the wiser. After all they both had a thoroughly offensive style when dealing with me. The one thing I am certain about is that this world is too small to hold two such atoms without an explosion.

Elaine, I suspect, knows the answer, but we never refer to that sort of unpleasantness in the gallery. © Youngman Carter 1960

★ ★ ★

How far a little scandal throws its beams.

H. V. PROCHNOW

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You're the sun in my eyes . . .
You're the sand in my hair . . .

On the coast of Coromandel
Dance they to the tunes of Handel;
Chorally, that coral coast
Correlates the bone to ghost,
Till word and limb and note seem one,
Blending, binding act to tone.

All day long they point the sandal
On the coast of Coromandel.
Lemon-yellow legs all bare
Pirouette to peruqued air . . .
Saraband and rigadoon
Dance they through the purring noon,
While the lacquered waves expand
Golden dragons on the sand—
Dragons that must steaming die
Of the sun's hot agony.

OSBERT SITWELL, *On the Coast of Coromandel*

Bathing Beauties

From time to time it was just warm enough for Mariette and Ma to shed wraps and sweaters and lie in bikinis on the little smooth-sanded *plage*. Mariette's figure, in spite of what Pop thought about its slight narrowing down since marriage, was well suited to the bikini. Her breasts were round but firm, girlishly fresh but quite mature. Her waist was delicate and narrow, with hips of pear-shaped line. From behind she appeared to have a beautiful little saddle, to which the lower of the bikini's three scarlet triangles was tied with the slenderest of strings.

Ma was not so lucky. She hadn't been able to get a bikini quite large enough to fit her. They didn't go quite as high as Ma

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in size. But there was, as she remarked, nothing much to them and she had consequently run up two for herself: one in bright petunia purple, her favourite colour, and the other in brilliant salmon rose . . .

The young men, on the other hand, were magnificent. Ma had never seen anything like it. All of them seemed to be tall, athletic, bronzed and lissom. Innumerable protruding knots of muscle stuck brownly out from all over them, accentuating arms, shoulders, chest and buttocks. Their hair was always perfectly crimped and waved and round their middles they wore nothing but skin-tight pudding bags tied with string.

The young men occupied the beach all day, tirelessly exercising themselves. They leapt in perpendicular fashion in the air, scissoring brown legs. They stood on their heads, did statuesque hand-stands, or pranced about like restless straining race-horses. They played leap-frog or ran about square-chested, like Grecian runners, hair slightly flowing, breasting the wind.

H. E. BATES, *A Breath of French Air*

Natural Features

Silhouettes of palms and women. Breeze.
An amiable red sea-shell
In all of the smiles.

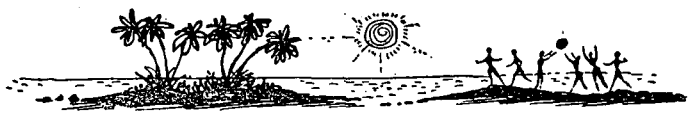
Subtle, as wings, the feet over the sand.

Diving-board.
One, two, three.
How that woman swims!

There's background music:
Jazz with lots of umph
And sex appeal.

From the shore of my cup
I watch the sea going and coming . . .

JORGE ARTEL, *Summer*
Translation by Julian Cooper



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Sea Fever

Ostend, eighteen thirty-five—
Don't you know the reason
For the crowds along the front?
It's the bathing season! . . .

" Mother, mother, may I bathe? "
" Yes, my darling daughter!
See the gaily striped machines
Drawn up to the water."

" Mother, mother, may I bathe? "
" Again, my darling daughter? "
" Ostend is so very hot,
It's heaven in the water."

" Mother, mother, may I bathe? "
" Meg, my darling daughter,
I can't think where you get it from,
This passion for the water."

WILLIAM PLOMER, *The Naiad of Ostend*

Beach Games

We returned to the beach . . .

She moved her hand up and down my spine. " You're beautifully brown," she said. " I hope you won't get any darker."

" I usually stay like this. I don't expect the good weather will last. More."

She rubbed harder.

" No, lightly."

She stroked me with her fingertips.

" Oh, darling." I was afraid to say it properly so I mumbled it. I took her in my arms and we fell back.

" Oh, Liz, I love you so much." . . .

We built sand castles, and ate our lunch, then played a game to win the last cigarette, which we shared as if it was very significant that the winner did not smoke it alone.

KENNETH MARTIN, *A Matter of Time*

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HONEYMAROON

" Mind she don't turn you to a skellington, Swedey! "

BY JOAN AIKEN

A WAVE swung high and lazily, with a curve like the white breast of a pouter pigeon, swept little Miss Roe clean off the deck of the elderly immigrant ship where she lay sleeping in the sun, and sucked her back under water without any noise or commotion; she vanished among sea-thistles, tangled ocean-daisies, foam-tips crossing this way and that, and the glitter of fins bright as mica. Nobody noticed; she was just a typist, with no relations, on her way to look for a job.

She called for help in her tiny breathless voice and tried to swim, but the waves tired her out with their salty slaps on face and arms; presently she was unconscious, floating and drifting in the teeth of a wandering current that edged her through reefs and slid her up the beach of an island, itself little more than a spit of sand in the enormous shining sea.

After a time Miss Roe recovered consciousness. All she knew at first was the gritty shifting feel of sand that has had water over it a short time before, warm under her body. Then she raised herself on her forearms and looked about; she saw the gentle slope of the island to her left, and the smooth sea, with a curdle of reefs far out, on her right. She brushed off the damp sand and sat up.

There was a salt taste on her lips, not unlike anchovies, not unpleasant; she licked them once or twice and tried to smooth the knots out of her sticky hair before starting off to look for help. She was still wearing her faded old sunsuit, so she was decent enough.

Barefooted she paddled over the hot, yielding sand, and found to her dismay that the island was small, circular, and uninhabited. It consisted of nothing but sandhills, save that in the centre there were two springs, one hot, one cold.

The hot spring bubbled and seethed in its own ferment of boiling mud, sinking away as fast as it rose. The cold spring, hardly bigger, nourished a couple of date-palms whose long silky leaves, whispering above, cast a small patch of shade into which Miss Roe gratefully dropped.

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Clusters of dates hung from the branches: she would not lack food. She ate a few absently, though she was not hungry. Rested, she began again her weary, useless pacing of this simplified horizon. Near the tops of the sandhills she saw small holes, but she prudently avoided them. She had been told that large spiders sometimes live in sand.

Two days passed. Miss Roe was not precisely unhappy, since she had no friends to pine for, but she was lonely, and desperately in need of occupation. Never much of a one to read, she was accustomed always to have in hand some piece of knitting or crochet, outside of office hours, and the unwonted lack of exercise for her supple fingers irked her terribly. There was no material on the island at all; only the sand and the palm trees whose leaves were too brittle and sharp for satisfactory use.

On the afternoon of the second day Miss Roe was lying by the cool spring, idly watching the water well up and then seep back into the damp sand. Already she was tanned by the sun; her slight body had taken the same colour as the sand she lay on, and her unimpressive mouse-coloured hair was bleaching to a silvery floss.

She saw two little brown things like bits of fluff approaching.

For one heart-sickening moment she thought that they were spiders, and then, on a breath of relief, perceived that they were in fact mice; small golden-brown mice with bright needlepoint eyes and long, extra-long tails, each ending in a tidy tassel like a miniature feather-duster. Normally she was afraid of mice, but these seemed unconnected with the dirty, furtive scufflings behind cheese crock or bread bin which were all her previous experience. They approached with caution, true, but with dignity, pausing at her slightest movement, putting their heads together as if they conferred, and then nimbling on again.

When they were only a couple of feet from her they stopped and went into a great pantomime, nodding their heads, flashing their almost invisible whiskers, gesturing with tiny hands and above all with their elongated mobile tails which whipped to and fro over their backs.

Miss Roe was not at all intelligent, but even she could see that they were communicating with each other, and attempting to do so with her.

It took them six months to teach her their language.

The mice lived in tiny cave-like hollows in the sand, shored and lined everywhere inside with slender sea-twigs that were polished white as ivory by the passing of countless furry bodies. Their principal food was dried fish-flakes, savoury, of a soft leaflike consistency, and silver-brown in colour. While she was

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lying unconscious the mice had fed Miss Roe with these; they were highly nutritious and contained Vitamin D in large quantities.

It was some time before the mice, whose intelligence was of a high order, realised that Miss Roe was almost totally ignorant about the workings of the civilisation from which she had come. At first they questioned her severely on ethics, civics, mathematics, and other topics, but in the end they resigned themselves to the fact that her mind contained little beyond an exhaustive knowledge of knitting patterns and the difference between right and wrong.

They did, however, become very fond of Miss Roe, and when they saw her pining for lack of occupation they started a fur collection, bringing her little heaps of moulted mousedown which her skilful fingers twirled into threads and knitted on palm-frond needles into various unnecessary articles.

When rescue appeared, in the form of a shabby schooner anchored outside the reef, the mice were saddened by the prospect of Miss Roe's departure.

Tears stood in her guileless eyes also.

"Isn't there anything I can do for you?" she begged. "You've been so kind to me! I could ask them to leave some cheese—or —or books so that you could learn to read—?"

Tass, the senior mouse, looked at her very kindly. His whiskers were grey, his eyes were twinkling. In appearance he was not unlike Einstein.

"The greatest service you can do us," he said, "is to tell no one of our existence. Can you promise that?"

"Of *course* I can!" She scrubbed the shine from her eyes with the back of a brown hand. "Is there truly nothing else?"

"Yes," he said dryly, "you can take those two young hotheads, Afi and Anep, with you, and rid our happy republic of a pair of troublemakers."

Afi and Anep joyfully accepted the chance to travel. And so, when the crew of the dinghy neared the shore, there was nothing to see but a solitary figure on a bare and uninhabited island. With astonishment they saw Miss Roe, slender and brown, wearing—for this was during the cool equinoctial winds—a bikini and thick sweater of mousewool which many an Italian starlet might have envied. They did not see Afi and Anep, the two young demagogues, whose bright little beady black eyes peered glancingly out through the cable-stitch from their snug hiding-place inside her big roll collar.

"Cripes," said Ant Arson, "wait till the captain sees this."

"You'd better wait," muttered Singer Jones, "or Cap'll feed

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you to the tiburones," and he shunted his jaw sideways with a meaning leer.

The boat's crew seemed haloed with gold to Miss Roe as they pulled towards her. Actually they were as unsavoury a load as might have been found anywhere in the South Pacific, and their captain was a fit leader for them.

Valentino MacTavish mooched about the ocean with his unshaven crew and his shocking old ship full of unmentionable cargoes, carrying on a dozen illegal trades, engaging in acts of minor piracy when it seemed safe, wanted by the police of every large port but always slipping away just before the net descended.

" Man ! " said Valentino MacTavish, eyeing Miss Roe with the incredulity of a cat that sees a whole dover sole laid on its dish. And he helped her over the gunwale.

She noticed first that the *Aurora* seemed full of dirty washing and sardine tins; second, that the captain, though very attentive in a queer way, was not much like Alec Guinness, her ideal of seamanly beauty; third, that the crew, huddled together in the waist, seemed jeeringly in awe of their captain; fourth, that the two totalitarian mice in her collar were becoming restive, possibly because their sharp nostrils detected the odour of proletarian comrades somewhere near at hand.

" I should like to wash my hands, please," she said, and was taken with suspicious promptitude to Valentino's cabin.

The mess and clutter depressed her. She found herself regretting the tidy island and friendly mice, feeling homesick.

She shook Afi and Anep out of her collar, and they rushed greedily about the floor, questing and roving among the discarded underwear and heady unfamiliar smells, presently making off down holes in the panelling to preach equality and the rights of mice. From time to time they darted joyously back to report on their successes with the ship's rodent population.

" Do be careful ! " Miss Roe exclaimed anxiously. " The captain said he was coming back soon to show me round."

" We won't let him see us."

They waved their tails in reassurance.

As it happened, they were both sitting on her shoulders, Anep telling her how he had set up committees to form trade unions, Afi reporting a lecture he had delivered to the boiler-room mice on the need for collective ownership of the means of production—when the door opened and Captain MacTavish came in. There was just time to fly under her collar once more.

Valentino carried a bottle of palm wine under his arm. He had already drunk half of it. Now he took another swig, put down the bottle, and advanced on Miss Roe in a purposeful

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manner. His mind was fuddled with drink, a suspicion that his crew were laughing at him, and the need for asserting his authority. A core of anger, mainly at himself, burnt in him; his eyes were bloodshot, shamed, and lustful. In many ways he was a piteous object.

To his astonishment, when he laid hold of the petrified Miss Roe, his amatory intentions were interrupted by a series of savage, needlesharp stabs in his left wrist and right forearm.

He shrieked, clawing at his arms, and shrieked again as, like animated scalpels, the two mice dived for his most vulnerable points.

The crew heard shrieks coming from the cabin, but this was a commonplace. True, the voice sounded like the captain's rather than the girl's, but Valentino was an eccentric, and it would have been the height of indelicacy to intrude—and, anyway, more than their lives were worth.

They settled down on the after-hatch, throwing numbered sardine tins for the chance of being next with the girl.

A couple of hours later someone gave a shout and the crew, focusing their eyes as best they could, saw a raft drifting in the *Aurora*'s direction.

"Hey, fellas, there's someone on it."

"It's the crazy Swede. You know? Olaf Myrdal."

"Think we oughta tell Cap?"

"Better not."

"Ah, shucks, we can disturb him by now, surely?"

Ant went down and peered through the cabin keyhole. The yell he let out brought the rest of the crew running, and in panicked incredulity they broke open the door.

Miss Roe was lying on the floor, deeply unconscious. At some distance from her lay a skeleton, white and shining.

It was not until Singer touched the bones and discovered them to be *warm* that real terror set in.

"Where in heck's it *come* from?" bellowed Ant, frightened and sweating, looking for reassurance to the others.

"Where's Cap?"

"But look—look," stuttered Dice Morgan. "Look at that finger!"

They looked. On a metacarpal bone shone a band of tarnished gold with a familiar amethyst. The captain had been something of a dandy.

"Good sakes!" breathed Ant. "It's *him*! It *is* Cap!"

Fear soon finds relief in vengeance.

"The girl's done it! Drop her over the side! Feed her to the sharks. She's a witch, she's a Jonah."

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Several of the crew were averse to touching Miss Roe at all, but Singer was not so particular, and he dragged her unconscious body on deck.

"Why not put her on the raft?" suggested Dice brilliantly. "We don't want her haunting us. We drop her overboard, the sharks eat her, we get her duppy climbing up the side every night and pulling us in by the ankles. Put her on the raft, let her haunt the loony Swede."

There was a chorus of agreement.

They hailed the raft, which was now floating past their stern.

"Hi there, you Swede! Will you take a bit of cargo for us?"

The Swede came to the door of his little cabin and surveyed them coldly.

"I wish for nothing that has been on your ship," he said. But already two men had grappled the raft alongside, and two more wrapped Miss Roe's body in a tarpaulin and rolled it over the gunwale. More by luck than judgment it fell on the balsa-wood deck of the raft.

"Adios, amigos!" shouted the crew of *Aurora*, leaning over the stern-rail and waving. "Have a happy honeymoon! Mind she don't turn you to a skellington, Swedey! Disconnecta dem dry bones!"

They drew away.

The Swede reluctantly removed the wrappings from the bundle they had tossed him. When he saw Miss Roe his expression of disapproval deepened. He scooped up a dipper of seawater and dashed it in her face.

Presently she came to, looked round her, and shuddered.

"Did they hurt you?" he said.

Her eyes slowly took him in—his bigness, his slow, gentle movements, his look of rather severe intelligence.

"Who are you? You don't look like those men." She pulled herself to a sitting position. "Am I still on the ship?"

"You are not on the ship, no. They threw you off. Have they injured you?"

Her eyes dilated. "He was going to—that captain! But the mice—it was horrible!" Suddenly she stiffened. "The mice! Afi and Anep—where are they?"

Afi ran from her collar and rubbed affectionately against her chin. She stroked him in relief. The Swede's expression softened as he observed this exchange. But then Miss Roe burst into tears.

"Do not cry, young lady. I do not know what you were doing on that ship, and I may say frankly that I did not wish for a passenger, especially a female one, but I think you are better

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off here than there. Wait, and I will make some seaweed tea. My name is Olaf Myrdal," he added with a certain dignity. "You may have heard of me."

"It's my mouse," sobbed poor Miss Roe, unheeding. "The other mouse, Anep! He's been left on that ship. Oh please, please go back and fetch him."

"Impossible, my dear child," he said gently. "That ship has a far greater command of speed than my raft and, as you can see, it is nearly five miles ahead of us."

Since Miss Roe continued to weep unrestrainedly he said after a while, with a slightly admonishing air, "I think you had better tell me all about it."

Miss Roe calmed down as she told her story. She couldn't help liking and trusting this tall, quiet man with his long sweeping golden beard and his benign expression.

The expression changed to one of qualified surprise as her story proceeded.

"So!" he said. "An island of intelligent mice. I should indeed like to call there. And you can communicate with them?"

"Yes," said Miss Roe, wiping her eyes, "we used to have ever such nice talks in the evenings. You'd be surprised what a lot goes through their little heads."

"This mouse you have here is one of them?"

Afi was prospecting busily about the raft, sniffing, tasting, and scrutinising.

"Can you request your small friend to come here?"

Miss Roe called Afi, who ran confidingly up her leg and from the eminence of her wrist looked in a searching manner at Myrdal.

"Does this man come from your country?" he asked Miss Roe. She shook her head. "Excellent," the mouse remarked, "then perhaps he can tell me things you do not know. Ask if in his land they have nationalised the means of production?"

Miss Roe translated this as best she could. Myrdal's eyebrows shot up.

"Doesn't he know?" said Afi, disappointed. "Well, ask him if he is familiar with these concepts: the transition of quantity into quality, the negation of the negation, the interpenetration of opposites?"

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed the Swede, "to think that I, who have come to sea in order to escape once and for all from mankind's violence and the conflicts of warring ideologies, should have run up against a Marxist mouse."

Miss Roe, accustomed to the philosophical talk of her mouse friends, was still unhappy.

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"What about poor Anep," she mourned, "alone on that ship, among those dreadful men?"

"He will be in no danger. If, as you tell me, he has already organised the ship's mice into trade unions, it is for the men that you should fear. Already they are doomed. Already, maybe, they have suffered the fate of their captain. And when the ship reaches port, what then? I believe that you have loosed on mankind, unwittingly, a greater destructive force than the hydrogen bomb. The age of men is ended; that of mice is about to begin."

"Oh dear," said Miss Roe. "Do you think we might have some of that seaweed tea you talked about?" It always took her a little while to assimilate an idea.

"When do *we* reach port?" she asked later, sipping the hot green fluid.

"Never."

"Never? But—"

"Did I not tell you that I came to sea to escape from violence? More than ever now it will be necessary to stay away from the world of men. I have ample resources on the raft—the works of Strindberg, Ibsen, Thomas Hardy, Voltaire, and Shakespeare."

Miss Roe seemed doubtful of these benefits. Then she brightened. "Couldn't we go back to my island?"

"My dear girl, there is nothing I should like better, in due course. But for the moment it would be out of the question. Afi is now a potential menace to the island's peace, since he has had experience of the efficacy of violence. Also—though this is merely a personal consideration—our own lives might be in danger if he were able to tell the other mice about the experiment with Captain MacTavish. They might wish to repeat it—especially as you promised not to reveal their existence and have done so."

"Yes—I see." But Miss Roe could hardly believe it of her dear mice.

"Mice do not live long," pronounced Olaf. "We can afford to drift for a year or two, until Afi dies of old age, before we return."

"Poor Afi! He will be rather bored. He was hoping to get to Australia."

"I shall learn his language and teach him Swedish; we shall have philosophical discussions. I shall read him Strindberg, also."

"I suppose you haven't any wool or knitting needles, have you?" said Miss Roe wistfully, feeling a little left out by this programme. He shook his head.

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"Another thing," he said. "We must be married. For a young girl and a man, even a philosopher like me, to drift about the ocean on a raft without matrimony is not at all seemly."

Married! Miss Roe stared in surprise that approached consternation at this godlike being who spoke the word so matter-of-factly. Never, never, in her wildest dreams . . .

"But how could we?" she said. "There's no church, no clergyman?"

"Marriage before witnesses is quite correct at sea. Your friend down there is rational—he will do admirably as a witness."

Miss Roe's eyes began to shine. This put a different complexion on things. If she were *married* to this Mr. Myrdal he would not seem quite so alarming; and she could endure the solemnity of drifting about the Pacific reading Strindberg aloud to a mouse if she was graced with the status of a married woman.

"But mind," he said, "no children!"

"No children?" She was dreadfully cast down. "But if all the world is going to be overrun with mice, surely it's our duty—?"

"My belief is that the human race is due to expire. It shall not be our part to prolong its death-throes."

"Oh dear," said Miss Roe again.

The simple marriage ceremony was performed. Afterwards Olaf and Afi, who had taken a great fancy to one another, settled down to a discussion of the philosophy of Kant.

Miss Roe, now Mrs. Myrdal, stretched out in the rays of the setting sun, chin propped on elbows, and watched them. He was nice, her new husband, she decided: a bit silly with all his fanciful ideas perhaps, a bit grand and dignified, but ever so kind! And all men had to be learnt and managed. It was a shame about the children, though; she had already planned to ask if she couldn't snip off a bit of that long, golden beard. It would knit up lovely into tiny bootees.

Oh well—she stretched, and rolled over into the last of the sunshine—there would be plenty of time to persuade him to change his mind.

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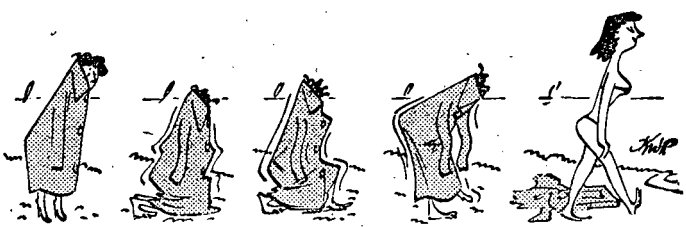

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David Caute, novelist, reviewer, historian, Fellow of All Souls, Oxford, is only 23. There was more about him on page 6.

THE CHICKEN AND AFTER

BY DAVID CAUTE

IN a small clearing shaded by giant trees the track had come to a dead end. Captain Awolo halted the patrol. We had to think again.

Amu Hassan had been the first to reach the clearing. A small, lithe man with the aquiline features of an Arab, he looked ten years younger than his thirty-five and was an expert as scout and tracker. He had the quick, instinctive movements of a bird, and a bird's capacity for sudden panic. Now he panicked.

"Be two tracks now, sah," he said helplessly.

"Well, which track do we take?" snapped Captain Awolo irritably.

Amu Hassan shrugged. "I no savvy, sah."

"Bloody useless man," complained Awolo, wiping his gleaming black face with his bush hat. Amu Hassan hung his head and slunk away to join the other men. It was noon and we were caught in the open under the full fury of a March sun. Tilting my waterbottle at over seventy degrees, I wished I had been more sparing before. But how is one to anticipate getting lost?

The sweat streamed down my face, stinging my eyes and depositing salt in my mouth. "Go steady with the water," I called. Awolo always left the unpopular orders to me.

He took me on one side, scowling. I lit a crumpled cigarette.

"The right-hand path looks better," he said without conviction.

I shrugged. To me neither looked better than the other. They both had a definite air of going nowhere.

"Amu Hassan always knows best," I said. "He wants us to turn back."

"I happen to be leading this patrol, Mr. Roberts, not Amu Hassan." Awolo's skin drew taut across his flat nose when he was angry. I noticed that his own waterbottle was running low.

"I thought you knew the way," I said, without disguising

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my annoyance. "Anyway, the only thing is to turn back."

Awolo spat an oyster of saliva on the ground, murdering an ant. The parched earth readily soaked up the moisture. In a moment the patch was dry again. He had lost the way but he, Charles Awolo, would not admit it. To turn back now would be a disgrace. He would lose face.

We sat for a while in the shade and I surveyed our position gloomily. Heading back to base camp at map reference 153768, we were now lost in a morass of trees, bushes, and winding tracks, without any landmark by which we could identify our position on the map. Awolo still thought he knew the way, but only Amu Hassan, I knew, could be trusted. And he was easily silenced. Squatting in the middle of nowhere I thought enviously of Hammersly, our company commander, who would at this moment be working himself into the beery stupor which disposed of his afternoons.

That morning Awolo and I had found him still in bed under the mosquito net, scratching lazily at his bare pink chest and eyeing a map morosely. Awolo, the ambitious professional soldier, despised the white degenerate and Hammersly, who was no fool, knew it. Awolo mocked him with elaborate courtesy and respect.

"Good of you fellahs to get up," Hammersly belched.

Awolo saluted at the foot of the bed. "I'm always up at reveille, sir."

"More fool you," said the major. Once a good soldier, he had gone down the drain in a torrent of drink and marital unhappiness. Caught in a promotion bottleneck, a West African posting was clearly the graveyard of his career. He was determined to bury himself in style.

"Well, d'you fellahs feel keen and fit?" I guessed he had hatched some strenuous scheme to keep us occupied while he dosed the day away.

I grunted vaguely, but Charles Awolo snapped his heels together and said Yessir, he thought it about time the men did a compass march. Which he intended for me, of course, not himself. Just the job for a raw subaltern. But he misjudged Hammersly's malice.

Once we had set out Awolo handed over to me. He had never cared for the tedium of infantry work, although he viewed himself as a ruthlessly efficient fighting soldier. Not that I cared; it gave me something to do, guiding the patrol on a fixed compass bearing. The "enemy" position which Hammersly had cooked up was in fact a tiny village about a mile away. Over that distance the smallest deviation of a few degrees from one's bearing can mean a final error of at least a hundred yards. The task is

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doubly difficult in scrubland, for the patrol has to be negotiated round enormous bushes without losing the original bearing. Paths are useless and deceptive. Awolo, who confined himself to occasional criticisms, doubtless hoped I would botch the job, and when we came over a small rise to find the village nestling at our feet he was clearly annoyed at my precision. It was regarded as another blow at African nationalism.

The peaceful village with its square mud houses and its wood smoke curling lazily into the hot air reminded me of a plasticine model. The clucking of hens and the wailing of children floated up to us blood-crazed mercenaries. The men had to have their pound of flesh and we bore down with rifles blazing blanks, swept through the village howling savagely, and when it was all over I felt out of breath and foolish to be playing childish games in the heart of nowhere. A few wizened old dames with naked flabby breasts had viewed our antics with well-deserved contempt.

The day's work was over. It only remained to fill the water-bottles from the village pump, return to base, clean out the rifles, and get an afternoon's sleep. It was at this moment, however, that Awolo took it into his head to assert his authority and to display his uncanny bushcraft. He rejected my plan of returning by compass as we had come. He knew the local paths: he would take us a quicker way. Awolo led us on to a nice fat path which inspired confidence and had a definite air of going somewhere. At first it bore south, which was generally the right direction, but gradually it narrowed and began to twist dreadfully, so that at one time I noticed from the sun that we were heading north-west. Awolo marched resolutely on, brushing aside my questions. After an hour my protests became more insistent.

" Don't interfere, Mr. Roberts," said the captain. " I know where I'm going."

And now the track had come to a dead end in this damned clearing. The men lay on their backs with their hats tilted to shade their faces. And a thick blanket of hostility lay between Awolo and myself.

" If we go back to the village," I said, " then we can steer for base by map and compass. It's the only safe way."

" It's an hour's march or more," said Awolo wearily.

" For all you know, this might be the road to Timbuktu. The men are running out of water."

Awolo eyed the men with evident contempt. " It will do them no harm to suffer a little."

Four months in Awolo's company had taught me how much he despised the " bush " northern troops. I protested against his attitude.

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" Don't think I'm blind," he muttered savagely. " We know your game!" His English accent was meticulous. I was fascinated by the movement of his pencil-slim moustache and by the brightness of his neat white teeth.

" Then I am undone," I said.

" Ha! You're all the same. You try and prevent our independence by ganging up with these ignorant peasants against us. You call them loyal. Divide and rule. Very pretty."

" You know damned well that I'm all for African independence." I was easily provoked and Awolo knew it.

" Lip service," he sneered. " You're quite ready to exploit the colour of your skin when it suits you, aren't you? Well, aren't you? I can see it now. You're ganging up against me."

" Don't be bloody absurd." But my words carried little conviction. The men's hostility was building up: they wanted me to lead them back.

Eventually we moved off down the right-hand path, following Awolo. My feet began to ache and a blister emerged under my left heel. I tried not to hobble, for the men were easily discouraged. The thought which obsessed me was that we might have passed within fifty yards of base camp without ever knowing it. Every bush looked the same.

I dropped back and marched beside each man in turn. They were sullen and resentful, refusing to respond to my bad jokes.

I began to watch Seidu Baz in particular, for this giant of a man with his sudden outbursts of terrifying rage acted as a temperamental barometer to the others. I knew that he could break my back, or Awolo's, with one arm, but preferred to forget the fact.

" Southern men be no good," Seidu Baz muttered to me. " They try be like white man. Humbug us plenty. No good."

I held my peace, watching his huge feet crush the dry powdery earth, eager for the April rains. I recalled the most spectacular of his escapes from prison: he had simply torn a door off its hinges and flung an interfering warder through a window.

" When white man leave army," volunteered Seidu Baz, louder this time, " me and my brothers go back for bush. Too much humbug."

" You catch fine pay in army," I said.

" Too much humbug, sah."

So we followed the path like a column of ants under the sun, and I dropped back leaving Seidu Baz to his dark thoughts. His mood was infectious: the others remained sullen. I wondered vaguely if my blister would burst.

Then the path divided again. Awolo halted and looked

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desperate. No amount of peering at the map could conceal from me his ineptitude.

"Massah Awolo be no good," volunteered Seidu Baz suddenly, and they all took their cue from him.

"Be no good," they grumbled.

Awolo turned on me. "So that's your game. You put them up to this. They abuse me and you do nothing. You turn them against me." Awolo looked ill with worry and fatigue. I shrugged. My loyalty was strained. If he behaved like a lunatic, I reasoned with a throbbing head, then he deserved no support.

"Well, what next?" he said aggressively.

"Oh lord, we've been through all this before. I've told you a hundred times. Turn back!"

My voice must have carried down the track. The men, who were squatting on their haunches draining the last of their water, eyed Awolo with evident hatred.

"We turn back," roared Seidu Baz.

"We go for back," echoed the others, twenty strong. Amu Hassan, the timid scout, took courage. On questions of direction he carried great prestige with us all: he had a habit of being right.

"Best go back," he said. "Then no more palaver."

Awolo was wiping his face feverishly with his bush hat. Seidu Baz, sensing his moment, flung his waterbottle high into the bushes and shouted, "No water—we die!"

The men rose to their feet, fingering their machetes. I had seen this happen only once before. I was uncertain and held my peace. It was Awolo's pride, I think, which gave him courage at that moment as he moved towards Seidu Baz. But he stopped a good five yards short of the black colossus.

Awolo spoke in an even voice, "Seidu Baz, be so good as to get your waterbottle from the bushes."

Seidu Baz didn't move. His arms hung loosely at his sides. The men watched him, fingering their machetes. I noticed how slender was Awolo's back. In the silence a bird screeched: somewhere a snake had found its mark.

I moved up behind Awolo. Seidu Baz glared at me, uncertain.

"Stand to attention," I snapped.

Awolo kept his eye on the African. "I'll handle this, Mr. Roberts." Seidu Baz stood to attention.

"Now get the waterbottle," ordered Awolo, sharper this time.

"No catch more water," grumbled Seidu Baz. But his eyes were downcast and I could see he was weakening.

"We catch water plenty soon," said Awolo confidently. With a roar Seidu Baz suddenly leapt into the undergrowth and emerged with his waterbottle, grinning sheepishly. The tribal

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scars formed grotesque patterns on his cheeks. The men dropped their machetes.

Awolo took the lead again and moved off down the right-hand path, confident he had regained our confidence and restored his prestige. When he had gone perhaps twenty paces he realised he was alone. None of us had moved. Awolo came back to me slowly, with bitter hatred in his eyes.

"I gave an order," he said.

"The men won't follow," I said.

"Ha! I like that very much. They won't if you don't, Mr. Roberts. A lot of support I get from you. Don't think I overlooked how you tried to do my job for me just now."

"For heaven's sake, don't shout," I pleaded.

"So you curry favour with these apes," cried Awolo. The sweat stood out in large beads on his face and bare arms. A line of white foam flecked his heavy lips and clung to his pencil-slim moustache. His face was close to mine and his breath smelt bad.

"He call us apes," shouted Seidu Baz. He towered over me. "Massah Roberts, you be fine massah past all. He call us bush apes. He humbug us plenty too much." Seidu Baz was now out of control. At all costs he was bent on avenging the humiliation of retrieving the waterbottle. He strode up to Awolo, stamping his feet so that the dust drifted into the officer's face. Awolo, I could see, was afraid.

Slowly, deliberately, Seidu Baz took off his pack. He laid it on the ground and his thick fingers tugged methodically at the straps. One large hand vanished into the pack, appeared to grasp something with difficulty, and then emerged—holding a tiny chicken.

"Be chicken," grinned Seidu Baz.

The men gathered round in an excited circle, evidently aware of what was to come. I don't know where he got that chicken: it must have been stolen from the village we had "attacked." He placed the tiny fluttering creature on the ground and stood up, barring its frenzied sallies with his large black-booted feet. The chicken fluttered miserably, squawking occasionally, opening its minute metal beak to gulp down hot air. My stomach turned over. Grinning still, Seidu Baz unsheathed his bayonet, holding it aloft, gleaming in the sun.

Awolo, like myself, appeared mesmerised. The circle of men grew tighter round us and I began to notice the rhythmic tapping of their feet. Saliva drooled from their mouths and their white saucer eyes appeared blank, hypnotised by the little bird. They were dancing. It was a tribal dance, a ritual sacrifice from the north. And Awolo—it was his task to save the chicken, if he dared. The challenge was inescapable.

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There was nothing I could do. It was not my authority they challenged. If I intervened the ritual would cease, but Awolo would be ruined.

Now Seidu Baz was on his knees, straddling the terrified bird, squawking its life away. He grinned insolently at Awolo, but the captain stood paralysed as Seidu seized the bird in his left hand and held his right arm flexed, gripping the bayonet. He spoke to the chicken and smiled slyly at Awolo.

I saw a flash of light. Even headless, the chicken continued to fight for life in the large bloodstained hand. Like a crab the head struggled in the dry powdery earth, its eyes sparkling like diamonds.

Awolo was offered the headless carcass. Awolo turned away, but he was surrounded. He twisted as the chicken had done, but there was no way out. Now his eyes too had the hard, frozen quality of diamonds. Awolo steadied himself, but he was panting hard and his voice carried little authority.

"Enough of that! Enough, I tell you. No more games."

Seidu Baz held out the bird to him. "You call us apes, massah. Now take bird and drink blood one time."

"I'll show you water," gasped Awolo. "Plenty water."

Seidu Baz hesitated. "Humbug plenty," he growled.

"Be no water," said Amu Hassan.

"I'll show you water plenty, if you follow me. Otherwise no water. You obey me—water plenty."

They looked to me now. It seemed to me that this was a desperate gamble of Awolo's. If he had lied, they would surely lynch him. But there is a level of thirst which dominates every other consideration, and we had reached that level. I nodded.

"Follow Massah Awolo," I said. Seidu Baz dropped the chicken. They shambled into single file, cursing savagely as progress became slower. We had to hack our way through giant creepers and I began to think of tree snakes and cobras. I started at the slightest unusual sound or movement. After a while I noticed that the ground was sloping downwards quite sharply and that Awolo was looking increasingly confident. I rounded a corner and found him smiling back at us in triumph, his arms outstretched.

A large swamp sprawled at our feet. Huge plants of a luscious green reared out of the water like primitive reptiles, round which a heavy swarm of mosquitoes hung low and menacing. The men shrieked with joy.

"O.K.," exclaimed Awolo. "You catch fine drink now. You go fill waterbottles one time. Then we move on. Hurry one time."

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I stared at him in amazement. "They can't drink from there," I heard myself say weakly. I lit a cigarette with difficulty. My hand shook.

Awolo was regarding me triumphantly. "Can't they, Mr. Roberts?"

"You'll kill the lot of them."

"Ha! So much does he understand of Africans." He seemed to be addressing the troops. Only then did I glimmer what was in his mind. Now he would turn the tables. I was bound to protest: how could I do otherwise? Awolo was to parade as the men's saviour while I became the devil incarnate denying them blessed water. Then, and only then, could he lead them in undisputed triumph along his crazy, intuitive path through the jungle. Face would be saved, honour regained.

Already a group led by Seidu Baz had flung down their rifles and packs and were wading into the slime, howling in anticipation. I was overcome by rage.

"Cut that out!" I screamed. "Just cut that out!" But I had used that phrase ten times too often to make it effective.

They wanted to get the liquid into their bodies. They needed it. It beckoned them, that fetid swamp. It was beautiful, cool, and still. It belonged to them because they had found it. Soon they would wade in and swim around, gulping down the water, cooling their heated bodies.

My shirt clung to me in one large patch of sweat. I was blinded by the glare off the golden water, like a sheet of glass, and felt strangely compelled towards it. I envied the trees which hung low over the swamp, dipping their branches deep into the water.

"No one must drink from there!" It was my voice, cracked and weak. How could it carry conviction, let alone authority? They just stared at me. Awolo was right. Like apes, they were, damned apes. I gave myself up to blind prejudice. Why should I care if these cretins wiped themselves out? Why should I be trustee for half Africa?

"We'll have to go back. You can't drink from there. Be bad water past all badness. You die plenty easy. You die!" It was barely a croak, a hotted-up death-rattle. They stared at me.

"Amu Hassan, you must lead the way. You be fine fine scout." I was losing my head. Awolo was smiling at me, his victory secure.

"They're quite immune, Mr. Roberts. You can't understand the ways of us Africans. You are not one of us." He turned to the men. "He is not one of us." His English accent was meticulous.

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"He be white man," said Seidu Baz slowly. "He no be one of us."

"Be white man," muttered the soldiers.

"Seidu Baz, come here." Anger had restored my voice. The giant was already waist-deep in slime.

"Mr. Roberts, you'll be good enough to let me manage this patrol," said Awolo, with the first hint of fear.

"Come here, Seidu Baz," I commanded. He tramped slowly through the mire and stood before me. He had stripped to the waist.

"You be fine soldier past all," I said, forcing a smile to my face. It must have been a mockery of a smile and I despised myself. But Seidu Baz had stripped to the waist.

He grinned. "Yessah. Be true."

"Other men all think you be best man. If you drink this water then all other men go drink and catch terrible palaver sickness. Some go die."

"Sah?"

"If you drink, you go kill these men."

"Kill 'em, sah? No savvy this thing."

"You be strong man, Seidu." The others were watching us.

"Yessah." He flexed his arm, very serious.

"But when I give you order you always obey. Always."

"Be thirst past all. Must drink." His mouth was open and his rubber tongue hung out, flaked with black.

Now came Awolo's voice, strangely remote. "They're quite immune to disease. They drink this sort of water all the time. You don't understand. How can you? You're a stranger to us."

Of course it was a lie. They would all go down as readily as I would. The thick swarm of mosquitoes had settled round us and we fell to thrashing around our faces feverishly. The tall trees seemed to be swimming in the haze now above me, now below. Or was it their reflection in the golden water? Was it water—was it oil? My legs were made of soft swamp mud . . . I was sinking gently into the mire, warm and brown. A familiar voice called, "Hurry up! We go soon. Hurry! Drink!"

Yet Seidu Baz still stood before me, hesitant and perplexed. He had never disobeyed a white officer.

"Seidu Baz, you must tell these men not to drink."

"Massah Awolo say drink, sah."

"I say no drink. Massah Awolo make big mistake."

"Be plenty thirsty, sah."

"I also be thirsty."

"Yessah."

"They all go die soon, Seidu."

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" Sah? "

" Tell them they go die in their own lingo. Massah Awolo and I no savvy your lingo. Massah Awolo be of different race. He no be of your people. His people bad past all. They try kill you."

Seidu Baz opened his mouth but no sound came out save a muted gasp. Life had winded him: again he seemed to struggle for breath and I trembled for what I had said. His giant hands slowly squeezed the air lifeless, impatient hands, black on the outside and a grained pink on the palm. His eyes were small and mean. They blazed with sudden fury, lighting a flaming torch in his face.

" Yessah! He be southern man. Be bloody man! "

There was a roaring in my ears and I thought I would collapse. I became aware that Awolo had grasped my shoulders. I still think to this day that he was crying, actually crying with rage and frustration.

" I warn you—" he shook me—" I warn you, you'll face a court martial." I made no effort to resist: there was little strength in his body and I found the motion soothing. " I'll ruin you. You bloody Europeans! We'll kick you into the gutter. Yes, into the gutter! "

I saw Seidu Baz take hold of Captain Awolo and suddenly Captain Awolo was no longer shaking me. His hands were no longer on me. Somehow he was no longer near me. There were two black stains on my shirt where his hands had been. I thought I heard a bird screech, but like no bird I had heard before.

Seidu Baz ran down to the edge of the swamp, seizing the men and dragging them away from the water, choking it from their throats with his deadly hands. Some fought wildly and were flung gasping into the mire at the edge of the swamp. All the while he roared, " Be bloody southern man. He try to kill us all with bad water. White massah say no drink."

Defeated, outmanœuvred, they took up the chorus one by one. " Be bad water. He try kill us."

Savagely they turned on their fellows who still tried to quench their thirst. Those who already had swamp water in their mouths spewed it out, and those who had swallowed some thrust their fingers deep into their throats and made desperate efforts to cough it up. They exalted in their agony with a religious fervour. Their thirst, their parched mouths, were a sacrifice to the great gods of the north, a defiance to the pagan south. They marked a bond of loyalty with the white man who was also thirsty.

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Once again Seidu Baz stood before me, his huge naked body heaving with exaltation, gleaming in the sun. I had not moved.

"Please, sah, I think we go for back now."

I remember how we dragged ourselves from the mire and how the mosquitoes pursued us. We followed the old path and Amu Hassan was in the lead now. My memories of the return journey are few, except that it never ended and that my blister had consumed the whole of my mind and body. But one moment stands out clearly in the haze: how the villagers we had attacked with such arrogant abandon in the morning watched us in silence as we filed through, ragged and exhausted. And how they marvelled to see the body of the officer with the broken back borne by Seidu Baz alone.

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★ ★ ★

Oh, grim and gloomy,
So grim and gloomy
Are the caves beneath the sea.
Oh, rare but roomy
And bare and boomy,
Those salt sea caverns be.

Oh, slim and slimy
Or grey and grimy
Are the animals of the sea.
Salt and oozy
And safe and snoozy
The caves where those animals be.

Hark to the shuffling,
Huge and snuffling,
Ravenous, cavernous, great sea-beasts!
But fair and fabulous,
Tintinnabulous,
Gay and fabulous are their feasts . . .

Oh, rare but roomy
And bare and boomy
Those caverns under the sea,
And grave and grandiose,
Safe and sandiose
The dens of her denizens be.

JAMES REEVES
from Grim and Gloomy

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STAGE FALL

Delightfully, he crumpled—
the perfect backward spin

BY V. S. PRITCHETT

IT WAS the evening of the Annual Dinner. More than two hundred accountants were at that hour changing into evening clothes, in the flats, villas, and hotel rooms of a large wet Midland city. At The Royal was Charles Peacock, slender in his shirt, balancing on one leg and gazing with frowns of affection in the wardrobe mirror at the other leg as he pulled his trousers on, and then with a smile of farewell as the second went in.

Buttoned up, relieved of nakedness, he visited other mirrors—the one at the dressing-table, the two in the bathroom, assembling the scattered aspects of the unsettled being called Peacock, "doing—" as he was apt to say—"no so badly" in this city which smelt of coal and where thirty-eight years ago he had been born.

When he left his flat there were mirrors in the hotel lift and down below in the foyer and outside in the street. Certain shop windows were favourable and assuring. The love affair was taken up again at the Assembly Rooms by the mirrors in the tiled corridor leading towards the bullocky noise of two-hundred-odd chartered accountants in black ties, taking their drinks under the chandeliers that seemed to weep above their heads.

Crowds or occasions frightened Peacock. They engaged him, at first sight, in the fundamental battle of his life: the struggle against nakedness, the panic of grabbing for clothes and becoming someone.

An acquaintance in a Scottish firm was standing near the door of the packed room as Peacock went in.

"Hullo, laddie," Peacock said, fitting himself out with a Scottish accent as he went into the crowded, chocolate-coloured buffet.

"What's to do?" he said, passing on to a Yorkshireman.

"Are you well now?" he said in his Irish voice.

And, gaining confidence, "Whatcha cock!" to a man up from London, until he was shaking hands in the crowd with the

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President himself who was leaning on a stick and had his foot in plaster.

"I hope this is not serious, sir," said Peacock in his best southern English, nodding at the foot.

"Bloody serious," said the President, sticking out his peppery beard. "I caught my foot in a grating. Some damn fools here think I've got gout."

No one who saw Peacock in his office, in Board Rooms, on a committee at meetings, knew the exhausting number of rough sketches that had to be made before the naked Peacock could become Peacock dressed for his part. Now, having spoken to several human beings, the fragments called Peacock closed up. And he had one more trick up his sleeve if he panicked again: he could drop into Dixieland negro.

Peacock got a drink at the buffet table and pushed his way to a solitary island of carpet, two feet square, in the guffawing corral. He was looking at the back of the President's neck.

Almost at once the President, on the crest of a successful joke he had told, turned round with appetite.

"Hah," he shouted. "Hah! Here's friend Peacock again."

Why "again?" thought Peacock.

The President looked Peacock over.

"I saw your brother this afternoon," shouted the President. The President's injured foot could be said to have made his voice sound like a hilarious smash.

Peacock's drink jumped and splashed his hand. The President winked at his friends.

"Hah!" said the President. "That gave our friend Peacock a scare!"

"At the Odeon," explained a kinder man.

"Is Shelmerdine Peacock your brother? The actor?" another said, astonished, looking at Peacock from head to foot.

"Shelmerdine Peacock was born and bred in this city," said the President fervently.

"I saw him in *Waste*," someone said. And others recalled him in *Doctor Zut*.

Four or five men stood gazing at Peacock with admiration, waiting for him to speak.

"Where is he now?" said the President, stepping forward, beard first. "In Hollywood? Have you seen him lately?"

They all moved forward to hear about the famous man.

Peacock looked to the right—he wanted to do this properly—but there was no mirror in that direction; he looked to the left but there was no mirror there. He lowered his head gravely and

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then looked up, shaking his head sorrowfully. He brought out the old reliable Dixieland voice.

" The last time I saw li'l old brudder Shel," he said, " he was being thrown out of the Orchid Room. He was calling the waiters ' goatherds.' "

Peacock looked up at them all and stood, collected, assembled, whole at last, among their shouts of laughter. One man who did not laugh and who asked what the Orchid Room was, was put in his place. And in a moment a voice bawled from the door, " Gentlemen. Dinner is served." The crowd moved through two anterooms into the Great Hall where, from their portraits on the wall, Mayors, Presidents, and Justices looked down with the complacent rosiness of those who have dined and died. It was gratifying to Peacock that the President rested his arm on his shoulder for a few steps as they went into the Hall.

Shel often cropped up in Peacock's life, especially in clubs and at dinners. It was pleasing. There was always praise; there were always questions. He had seen the posters about Shel's film during the week on his way to his office. They pleased, but they also troubled.

Peacock stood at his place at table in the Great Hall and paused to look round, in case there was one more glance of vicarious fame to be collected. He was enjoying one of those pauses of self-possession in which, for a few seconds, he could feel those sensations which Shel must feel when he stepped before the curtain to receive the applause of some great audience in London or New York. Then Peacock sat down. More than two hundred soup-spoons scraped.

" Sherry, sir ? " said the waiter.

Peacock sipped.

He meant no harm to Shel, of course. But in a city like this, with Shel appearing in a big picture, with his name fifteen feet long on the hoardings, talked about by girls in offices, the instinct of family disparagement was naturally tickled into life. The President might laugh and the crowd admire, but it was not always agreeable for the family to have Shel roaming loose—and often very loose—in the world. One had to assert the modesty, the anonymity of the ordinary, assiduous Peacocks.

One way of doing this was to add a touch or two to famous scandals: to enlarge the drunken scrimmages and add to the divorces and the breaches of contract, increase the overdoses taken by flighty girls. One was entitled to a little rake-off—an accountant's charges—from the fame that so often annoyed. One was entitled, above all, because one loved Shel.

" Hock, sir ? " said the waiter.

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Peacock drank. Yes, he loved Shel.

Peacock put down his glass, and the man opposite to him spoke across the table: a man with an amused mouth, who turned his sallow face sideways so that one had the impression of being inquired into under a loose lock of black hair by one sharp serious eye only.

"An actor's life is a struggle," the man said.

Peacock recognised him: it was the man who had not laughed at his story and who had asked what the Orchid Room was, in a voice that had a sad and puncturing feeling for information sought for its own sake.

Peacock knew this kind of admirer of Shel's and feared him. They were not content to admire, they wanted to advance into intimacy and collect facts on behalf of some general view of life's mysteriousness. As an accountant, Peacock rejected mystery.

"I don't think li'l ole brother Shel has struggled much," said Peacock, wagging his head from side to side carelessly.

"I mean he has to dedicate himself," said the man.

Peacock looked back mistrustfully.

"I remember some interview he gave about his schooldays—in this city," said the man. "It interested me. I do the books for the Hippodrome."

Peacock stopped wagging his head from side to side. He was alert. What Shel had said about his early life had been damned tactless.

"Shel had a good time," said Peacock sharply. "He always got his own way."

Peacock had put on his face of stone. He dared the man to say out loud, in that company, three simple English words. He dared him. The man smiled and did not say them.

"Volnay, sir," said the waiter as the pheasant was brought. Peacock drank.

"Fried Fish Shop," Peacock said to himself as he drank.

Those were the words. Shel could have kept his mouth shut about that. I'm not a snob, but why mention it? Why, after they were all doing well, bring ridicule upon the family. Why not say, simply "shop?" Why not say, if he had to, "Fishmonger?" Why mention "Frying?" Why add "*Bankrupt* Fried Fish Shop?"

Peacock drank.

It was swinish, disloyal, ungrateful. Bankrupt—all right, but some of that money—Peacock said, hectoring the pheasant on his plate—paid for Shel's years at the Dramatic School. It was unforgivable.

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Peacock looked across at the man opposite, but the man had turned to talk to a neighbour. Peacock finished his glass and chatted with *his* neighbour, but he felt like telling the whole table a few facts about dedication.

Dedication—he would have said. Let us take a look at the figures. An example of Shel's dedication in those Fried Fish Shop days he is so fond of remembering to make fools of us.

Saturday afternoon. Father asleep in the back room. Shel says, "Come down the High Street with me, Charles. I want to get a record." Classical, of course. Usual swindle. If we get into the shop he won't have the money and will try to borrow from me. "No," I say. "I haven't got any money." "Well, let's get out of this stink of lard and fish." He wears me down. He wore us all down, the whole family. He would be sixteen, two years older than me. And so we go out and at once I know there is going to be trouble. "I saw the Devil in Cramers," he says.

We go down the High Street to Cramers, it's a music shop, and he goes up to the girl to ask if they sell bicycle pumps or rubber heels. When the girl says, "No," he makes a terrible face at her and shouts out, "Bah."

At Hooks, the stationers, he stands at the door, and calls to the girl at the cash desk, "You've got the Devil in here. I've reported it," and slams the door.

We go on to Bonds, the grocers, and he pretends to be sick when he sees the bacon. Goes out. "Rehearsing," he says. The Bonds are friends of Father's. There is a row. Shel swears he was never anywhere near the place and goes back the following Saturday and falls flat on the floor in front of the Bond daughter groaning, "I've been poisoned. I'm dying. Water! Water!" Falls flat on his back . . .

"Caught his foot in a grating, he told me, and fell," the man opposite was saying. "Isn't that what he told you, Peacock?"

Peacock's imaginary speech came suddenly to an end. The man was smiling as if he had heard every word.

"Who?" said Peacock.

"The President," said the man. "My friend, Mr. McAlister, is asking me what happened to the President. Did he fall in the street?"

Peacock collected himself quickly and to hide his nakedness became Scottish. "Aye, mon," he nodded across the table. "A wee bit of a tumble in the street."

Peacock took up his glass and drank.

"He's a heavy man to fall," said the man called McAlister.

"He carries a lot of weight," said his neighbour.

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Peacock eyed him. The impression was growing that this man knew too much, too quietly. It struck him that the man was one of those who ask what they know already, a deeply unbelieving man. They have to be crushed.

"Weight makes no difference," said Peacock firmly.

"It's weight and distance," said the Scotsman. "Look at children."

Peacock felt a smile coming over his body from the feet upwards. "Weight and distance make no difference," Peacock repeated.

"How can you say that?"

An enormous voice, hanging brutally on the air like a sergeant's, suddenly shouted in the Hall. It was odd to see the men in the portraits on the wall still sitting down when the voice sounded. It was the voice of the toastmaster.

"Gen-tle-men," it shouted. "I ask you. To rise to. The Toast of Her. Maj-es-ty the Queen."

Two hundred or more accountants pushed back their chairs and stood up. "The Queen," they growled.

And one or two, Peacock among them, fervently added, "God Bless Her," and drained his glass.

Two hundred or more accountants sat down. It was the moment Peacock loved. And he loved the Queen.

"Port or brandy, sir?" the waiter asked.

"Brandy," said Peacock.

"You were saying that weight and distance make no difference. How do you make that out?" the sidelong man opposite said in a sympathetic and curious voice that came softly and lazily out.

Peacock felt the brandy burn. The question floated by, answerable if seized as it went, and yet, suddenly, unanswerable for the moment. Peacock stared at the question keenly as if it were a fly that he was waiting to swat when it came round again. Ah, there it came. Now! But no, it had gone by once more.

It was answerable. He knew the answer. Peacock smiled loosely, biding his time. He felt the flame of authority, of absolute knowledge burn in him.

There was a hammering at the President's table, there was hand clapping. The President was on his feet, and his beard had begun to move up and down.

"I'll tell you later," said Peacock curtly across the table. The interest went out of the man's eye.

"Once more," the President's beard was saying, and it seemed sometimes that he had two beards. "Honour," said one beard. "Privilege," said the other. "Old friends," said both beards

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together. "Speeches . . . brief . . . reminded of story . . . shortest marriage service in the world . . . Tennessee . . ."

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" shouted a pack of wolves, hyenas, hounds, in dinner-jackets.

Peacock looked across at the unbeliever who sat opposite. The interest in weight and distance had died away in his face.

"Englishman . . . Irishman . . . Scotsman . . . train . . . Englishman said . . . Scotsman said . . . 'Och,' says Paddy . . ."

"Hah! Hah! Hah," from the pack.

Over the carnations in the silver-plated vases on the table, over the heads of the diners, the cigar smoke was rising sweetly, and the first level indigo shafts of it were tipping across the middle air and turning the portraits of the Past Masters into daydreams. Peacock gazed at it. Then a bell rang in his ear, so loudly that he looked shyly to see if anyone else had heard it. The voice of Shel was on some line of his memory: a voice richer, more insinuating than the toastmaster's or the President's, a voice utterly flooring.

"Abel?" Shel was saying. "Is that you, Abel? This is Cain speaking. How's the Smoke? Is it still going up straight to heaven? Not blowing about all over the place . . ."

The man opposite caught Peacock's eye for a second, as if he too had heard the voice, and then turned his head away. And, just at the very moment when once more Peacock could have answered that question about the effect of weight and distance, the man opposite stood up. All the accountants stood up. Peacock was the last. There was another toast to drink. And immediately there was more hammering and another speaker.

Peacock's opportunity had gone. The man opposite had moved his chair back from the table and was sitting sideways to the table, listening, his interest in Peacock gone for good.

Peacock became lonely. Sulkily he played with matchsticks and arranged them in patterns on the tablecloth. There was a point at Annual Dinners when he always did this. It was that point when one saw the function had become fixed in a flash photograph in the gloss of celebration and when everyone looked sickly and old. Eyes became hollow, temples sank, teeth loosened. Shortly the diners would be carried out in coffins. One waited restlessly for the thing to be over.

Ten years of life went by and then, it seemed, there were no more speeches. There was some business talk in groups; then twos and threes left the table. Others filed off into a large Chamber next door. Peacock's neighbours got up.

He, who feared occasions, feared even more their dissolution.

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It was like that frightening ten minutes in a theatre when the audience slowly moves out, leaving a hollow stage and row after row, always increasing, of empty seats behind them. In a panic Peacock got up. He was losing all acquaintance. He had even let the man opposite slip away, for that man was walking down the Hall with some friends.

Peacock hurried down his side of the long table to meet them at the bottom, and when he got there he turned and barred their way.

"What we were talking about," he said. "It's an art. Simply a matter of letting the breath go, relaxing the muscles. Any actor can do it. It's the first thing they learn."

"I'm out of my depth," said the Scotsman.

"Falling," said Peacock. "The stage fall."

He looked at them with dignity, then he let the expression die on his face. He fell quietly full length to the floor. Before they could speak he was up on his feet.

"My brother weighs fifteen and a half stone," he said with condescension to the man opposite. "The ordinary person falls and breaks an arm or a foot because he doesn't know. It's an art."

His eyes conveyed that if the Peacocks had kept a Fried Fish Shop years ago, they had an art.

"Simple," said Peacock.

And down he went, thump, on the carpet again. And, lying at their feet, he said, "Painless. Nothing broken. Not a bruise. I said 'an art.' Really one might call it a science. Do you see how I'm lying?"

"What's happened to Peacock?" said two or three men, joining the group.

"He's showing us the stage fall."

"Nothing," said Peacock, getting up and brushing his coat-sleeve and smoothing back his hair. "It is just a stage trick."

"I wouldn't do it," said a large man, patting his stomach.

"I've just been telling them—weight is nothing. Look." Peacock fell down and got up at once.

"You turn. You crumple. You can go flat on your back. I mean that is what it looks like," he said.

And Peacock fell.

"Shel and I used to practise it in the bedroom. Father thought the ceiling was coming down," he said.

"Good God, has Peacock passed out?" A group standing by the fireplace in the Hall called across. Peacock got up and, brushing his jacket again, walked up to them. The group he had left watched him. There was a thump.

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" He's done it again," the man opposite said.

" Once more. There he goes. Look, he's going to show the President. He's going after him. No, he's missed him. The old boy has slipped out of the door."

Peacock was staring with annoyance at the door. He looked at other groups of twos and threes.

" Who was the casualty over there ? " someone said to him as he walked past.

Peacock went over to them and explained.

" Like judo," said a man.

" No ! " said Peacock indignantly, even grandly. And in Shel's manner. Anyone who had seen Shelmerdine Peacock affronted knew what he looked like. That large white face trod on you. " Nothing to do with judo. This is the theatre . . ."

To the man who had said judo, Peacock said, " No throwing, no wrestling, no somersaulting or fancy tricks. That is not theatre. Just . . . simply . . ." said Peacock. And crumpling, as Shel might have done in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* or as some gangster shot in the stomach, Peacock once more let his body go down with the cynicism of the skilful corpse.

This time he did not get up at once. He looked up at their knees, their waists, at their goggling faces, saw under their double chins and under their hairy eyebrows. He grinned at their absurdity. He saw that he held them. They were obliged to look at him. Shel must always have had this sensation of hundreds of astonished eyes watching him lie, waiting for him to move. Their gaze would never leave the body.

He never felt less at a loss, never felt more completely himself. Even the air was better at carpet level; it was certainly cooler and he was glad of that. Then he saw two pairs of feet advancing from another group. He saw two faces peep over the shoulders of the others, and heard one of them say. " It's Peacock—still at it."

And then he saw the two pairs of boots and trousers go off.

Peacock got to his feet at once and resentfully stared after them. He knew something, as they went, that Shel must have known: the desperation, the contempt for the audience that is thinning out. He was still brushing his sleeve and trousers' legs when he saw everyone moving away out of the Hall. Peacock moved after them into the Chamber.

A voice spoke behind him. It was the quiet, intimate voice of the man with the loose lock of black hair who had sat opposite to him.

" You need a drink," the man said.

They were standing in the Chamber where the buffet table

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was. The man had gone into the Chamber and, clearly, he had waited for Peacock. A question was going round as fast as a catherine-wheel in Peacock's head and there was no need to ask it: it must be so blindingly obvious. He looked for someone to put it to, on the quiet, but there were only three men at the buffet table with their backs turned to him.

Why—the question ran—at the end of a bloody good dinner is one always left with some awful drunk, a man you've never liked—an unbeliever?

Peacock mopped his face. The unbeliever was having a short disgusting laugh with the men at the bar and now was coming back with a glass of whisky.

"Sit down. You must be tired," said the unbeliever.

They sat down. The man spoke of the dinner and the speeches. Peacock did not listen. He had just noticed a door leading into a small anteroom and he was wondering how he could get into it.

"There was one thing I don't quite get," the man said. "Perhaps it was the quickness of the hand deceiving the eye, I should say feet. What I mean is—do you first take a step, I mean like in dancing: I mean is the art of falling really a paradox—I mean the art of keeping your balance all the time?"

The word *paradox* sounded offensive to Peacock.

The man looked too damn clever, in Peacock's opinion, and didn't sit still.

Wearily Peacock got up.

"Hold my drink," he said. "You are standing like this, or facing sideways—on a level floor, of course. On a slope like this . . ."

The man nodded.

"I mean—well, now, watch carefully. Are you watching?"

"Yes," said the man.

"Look at my feet," said Peacock.

"No," said the man hastily, putting out a free hand and catching Peacock by the arm. "I see what you mean. I was just interested in the theory."

Peacock halted. He was offended. He shook the man's arm off.

"Nothing theoretical about it—about it," he said. And shaking his sleeves added, "No paradox."

"No," said the man, standing up and grabbing Peacock so that he could not fall. "I've got the idea."

He looked at his watch. "Which way are you going? Can I give you a lift?"

Peacock was greatly offended. To be turned down! He

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nodded to the door of the anteroom. "Thanks," he said. "The President's waiting for me."

"The President's gone," said the man. "Oh well, good night." And he went away. Peacock watched him go. Even the men at the bar had gone.

He was alone.

"But thanks," he called after him. "Thanks."

That unhappy feeling of working out a few personalities came back to Peacock, as cautiously he sketched a course into the anteroom.

It was a small high room, quite empty and yet—one would have said—packed with voices, chattering, laughing, and mixed with music along the panelled walls, but chiefly coming from behind the heavy green velvet curtains that were drawn across the window at one end. There were no mirrors, but Peacock had no need of them. The effect was ornate—gilded pillars at the corners, a small chandelier rising and falling gracefully from a carven ceiling.

On the wall hung what, at first sight, seemed to be two large oil paintings of queens of England but, on going closer, Peacock saw there was only one oil painting—of Queen Victoria. Peacock considered it. The opportunity was enormous. Loyally, his face went blank. He swayed, loyally fell, and loyally got to his feet. The Queen might or might not have clapped her little hands.

So encouraged, he fell again and got up. She was still sitting there.

"Shel," said Peacock aloud to the Queen, "has often acted before Royalty. He's in Hollywood now," he explained to her, "having left me to settle all his tax affairs. Hundreds of documents." All lies, of course. And there was this case for alimony going on.

"He's had four wives," he said to Queen Victoria. "That's the side of theatre life I couldn't stand, even when we were boys. I could see it coming. But—watch me," he said.

And delightfully he crumpled, the perfect backward spin. Leaning up on his elbow from where he was lying, he waited for her to speak.

She did not speak, but two or three other queens joined her, all crowding and gossiping together, as Peacock got up. The Royal Box! It was full. Cars hooting outside the window behind the velvet curtains had the effect of an orchestra and then, inevitably, those heavy green curtains were drawn up.

A dark, packed, and restless auditorium opened itself to him.

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There was dense applause. It was an occasion beyond anything he would have sought but which, coming out of darkness, had the electric certainty of a dream. He had become Shel.

Peacock stepped forward in his wholeness. "Not to fall, not to fall, this time," he murmured. To bow. One must bow and and bow and bow and not fall, to the applause. He set out. It was a strangely long uphill journey towards the footlights, and not until he got there did it strike him that he did not know how to bow. Indeed, at the first attempt the floor came up and hit him.

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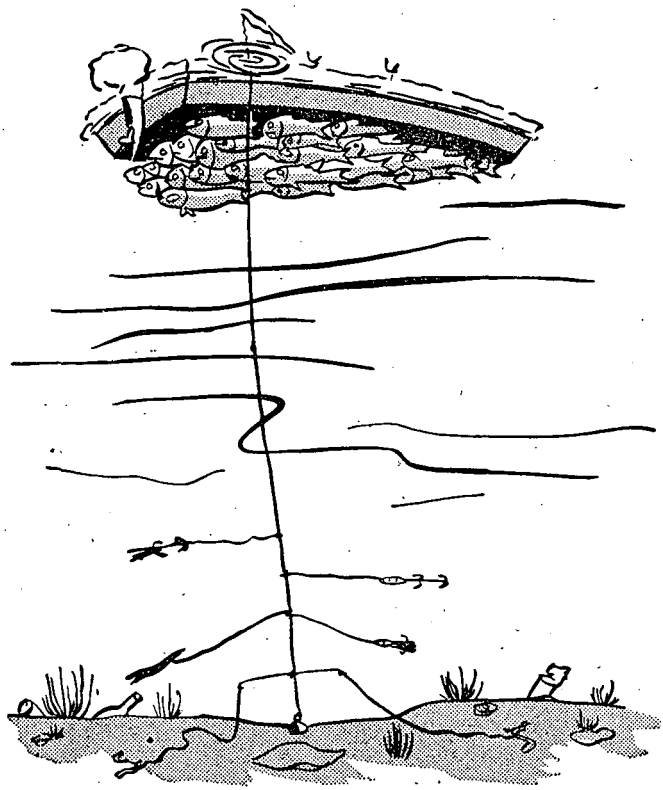

"Listen, Pete, I've fished for years, and on a day like this they're right on the bottom."

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DRUMMER BOY OF SHILOH

He was the heart of the army

BY RAY BRADBURY

IN THE APRIL night, more than once, blossoms fell from the orchard trees and lighted with rustling taps on the drumhead. At midnight a peach stone left miraculously on a branch through winter, flicked by a bird, fell swift and unseen; it struck once, like panic, and jerked the boy upright. In silence he listened to his own heart ruffle away, away—at last gone from his ears and back in his chest again.

After that he turned the drum on its side, where its great lunar face peered at him whenever he opened his eyes.

His face, alert or at rest, was solemn. It was a solemn time and a solemn night for a boy just turned fourteen in the peach orchard near Owl Creek not far from the church at Shiloh.

". . . thirty-one . . . thirty-two . . . thirty-three." Unable to see, he stopped counting.

Beyond the thirty-three familiar shadows forty thousand men, exhausted by nervous expectation and unable to sleep for romantic dreams of battles yet unfought, lay crazily askew in their uniforms.

A mile farther on, another army was strewn helter-skelter, turning slowly, basting themselves with the thought of what they would do when the time came—a leap, a yell, a blind plunge from their strategy, raw youth their protection and benediction.

Now and again the boy heard a vast wind come up that gently stirred the air. But he knew what it was—the army here, the army there, whispering to itself in the dark. Some men talking to others, others murmuring to themselves, and all so quiet it was like a natural element arisen from South or North with the motion of the earth towards dawn.

What the men whispered the boy could only guess and he guessed that it was, " Me, I'm the one, I'm the one of all the rest who won't die. I'll live through it. I'll go home. The band will play. And I'll be there to hear it."

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Yes, thought the boy, that's all very well for them, they can give as good as they get!

For with the careless bones of the young men, harvested by night and bindled around campfires, were the similarly strewn steel bones of their rifles with bayonets fixed like eternal lightning lost in the orchard grass.

Me, thought the boy, I got only a drum, two sticks to beat it, and no shield.

There wasn't a man-boy on this ground tonight who did not have a shield he cast, riveted, or carved himself on his way to his first attack, compounded of remote but nonetheless firm and fiery family devotion, flag-blown patriotism, and cocksure immortality strengthened by the touchstone of very real gunpowder, ramrod, Minié ball, and flint. But without these last, the boy felt his family move yet farther off in the dark, as if one of those great prairie-burning trains had chanted them away, never to return—leaving him with this drum which was worse than a toy in the game to be played tomorrow or some day much too soon.

The boy turned on his side. A moth brushed his face, but it was peach blossom. A peach blossom flicked him, but it was a moth. Nothing stayed put. Nothing had a name. Nothing was as it once was. If he stayed very still, when the dawn came up and the soldiers put on their bravery with their caps, perhaps they might go away, the war with them, and not notice him lying small here, no more than a toy himself.

"Well, by thunder now," said a voice. The boy shut his eyes to hide inside himself, but it was too late. Someone, walking by in the night, stood over him. "Well," said the voice quietly, "here's a soldier crying *before* the fight. Good. Get it over. Won't be time once it all starts."

And the voice was about to move on when the boy, startled, touched the drum at his elbow. The man above, hearing this, stopped. The boy could feel his eyes, sense him slowly bending near. A hand must have come down out of the night, for there was a little rat-tat as the fingernails brushed and the man's breath fanned the boy's face.

"Why, it's the drummer boy, isn't it?"

The boy nodded, not knowing if his nod was seen. "Sir, is that you?" he said.

"I assume it is." The man's knees cracked as he bent still closer. He smelt as all fathers should smell, of salt-sweat, tobacco, horse, and boot leather, and the earth he walked upon. He had many eyes. No, not eyes, brass buttons that watched the boy.

He could only be, and was, the general. "What's your name, boy?" he asked.

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" Joby, sir," whispered the boy, starting to sit up.

" All right, Joby, don't stir." A hand pressed his chest gently, and the boy relaxed. " How long you been with us, Joby?"

" Three weeks, sir."

" Run off from home or join legitimate, boy?"

Silence.

" Damn-fool question," said the general. " Do you shave yet, boy? Even more of a fool. There's your cheek, fell right off the tree overhead. And the others here, not much older. Raw, raw, damn raw, the lot of you. You ready for tomorrow or the next day, Joby?"

" I think so, sir."

" You want to cry some more, go on ahead. I did the same last night."

" You, sir?"

" God's truth. Thinking of everything ahead. Both sides figuring the other side will just give up, and soon, and the war done in weeks and us all home. Well, that's not how it's going to be. And maybe that's why I cried."

" Yes, sir," said Joby.

The general must have taken out a cigar now, for the dark was suddenly filled with the Indian smell of tobacco unlighted yet, but chewed as the man thought what next to say.

" It's going to be a crazy time," said the general. " Counting both sides, there's a hundred thousand men—give or take a few thousand—out there tonight, not one as can spit a sparrow off a tree, or knows a horse clod from a Minié ball. Stand up, bare the breast, ask to be a target, thank them and sit down, that's us, that's them. We should turn tail and train four months, they should do the same. But here we are, taken with spring fever and thinking it blood lust, taking our sulphur with cannons instead of with molasses, as it should be—going to be a hero, going to live for ever. And I can see all them over there nodding agreement, save the other way round.

" It's wrong, boy, it's wrong as a head put on hindside front and a man marching backwards through life. Sometime this week more innocents will get shot out of pure Cherokee enthusiasm than ever got shot before. Owl Creek was full of boys splashing around in the noonday sun just a few hours ago. I fear it will be full of boys again, just floating, at sundown tomorrow, not caring where the current takes them."

The general stopped and made a little pile of winter leaves and twigs in the dark as if he might at any moment strike fire to them to see his way through the coming days when the sun might not show its face because of what was happening here and just beyond.

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The boy watched the hand stirring the leaves and opened his lips to say something, but did not say it. The general heard the boy's breath and spoke himself.

"Why am I telling you this? That's what you wanted to ask, eh? Well, when you got a bunch of wild horses on a loose rein somewhere, somehow you got to bring order, rein them in. These lads, fresh out of the milkshed, don't know what I know; and I can't tell them—men actually die in war. So each is his own army. I got to make one army of them. And for that, boy, I need you."

"Me!" The boy's lips barely twitched.

"You, boy," said the general quietly. "You are the heart of the army. Think about that. You are the heart of the army. Listen to me, now."

And lying there, Joby listened. And the general spoke. If he, Joby, beat slow tomorrow, the heart would beat slow in the men. They would lag by the wayside. They would drowse in the fields on their muskets. They would sleep for ever after that—in those same fields, their hearts slowed by a drummer boy and stopped by enemy lead.

But if he beat a sure, steady, ever faster rhythm, then, then, their knees would come up in a long line down over that hill, one knee after the other, like a wave on the ocean shore. Had he seen the ocean ever? Seen the waves rolling in like a well-ordered cavalry charge to the sand? Well, that was it, that's what he wanted, that's what was needed. Joby was his right hand and his left. He gave the orders, but Joby set the pace.

So bring the right knee up and the right foot out and the left knee up and the left foot out, one following the other in good time, in brisk time. Move the blood up the body and make the head proud and the spine stiff and the jaw resolute. Focus the eye and set the teeth, flare the nostril and tighten the hands, put steel armour all over the men, for blood moving fast in them does indeed make men feel as if they'd put on steel. He must keep at it, at it! Long and steady, steady and long!

Then, even though shot or torn, those wounds got in hot blood—in blood he'd helped stir—would feel less pain. If their blood was cold, it would be more than slaughter, it would be murderous nightmare and pain best not told and no one to guess.

The general spoke and stopped, letting his breath slack off. Then, after a moment, he said, "So there you are, that's it. Will you do that, boy? Do you know now you're general of the army when the general's left behind?"

The boy nodded mutely.

"You'll run them through for me then, boy?"

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" Yes, sir."

" Good. And, God willing, many nights from tonight, many years from now, when you're as old or far much older than me, when they ask you what you did in this awful time, you will tell them—one part humble and one part proud—I was the drummer boy at the battle of Owl Creek or the Tennessee River, or maybe they'll just name it after the church there. I was the drummer boy at Shiloh.

" Good grief, that has a beat and sound to it fitting for Mr. Longfellow. ' I was the drummer boy at Shiloh.' Who will ever hear those words and not know you, boy, or what you thought this night, or what you'll think tomorrow or the next day when we must get up on our legs and move."

The general stood up. " Well, then. God bless you, boy. Good night."

" Good night, sir." And tobacco, brass, boot polish, salt-sweat, and leather, the man moved away through the grass.

Joby lay for a moment staring, but unable to see where the man had gone. He swallowed. He wiped his eyes. He cleared his throat. He settled himself. Then, at last, very slowly and firmly he turned the drum so it faced up towards the sky.

He lay next to it, his arm round it, feeling the tremor, the touch, the muted thunder as all the rest of the April night in the year 1862, near the Tennessee River, not far from the Owl Creek, very close to the church named Shiloh, the peach blossoms fell on the drum.

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REEL LIFE!

The Cromers' balls were famous in Cairo. One New Year's Eve, when the whole diplomatic corps and Cairo society had been invited, Lady Cromer arranged for the officers of the Highland regiment then stationed in Cairo to give an exhibition of reel dancing in the interval before supper. Monsieur Maskens, the Belgian Consul General, had brought his daughter of eighteen to her first ball. Everybody was duly sitting in their gilt chairs on the sides of the ballroom when the pipes started up, and in swept eight officers in their full Highland kit and began an eightsome reel. Mademoiselle Maskens gazed fascinated at this exhibition of bare knees and swirling kilts, but the effect on Monsieur Maskens was very different.

" *Mon dieu,*" he exclaimed. " *La danse des indigènes ! Où est ma fille? Je dois la faire partir immédiatement !* "

SIR RONALD WINGATE, *Not in the Limelight*

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Orange Bitters

He hangs in shades the orange bright,
Like golden lamps in a green night . . .

ANDREW MARVELL

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.

WALLACE STEVENS, *Sunday Morning*

Oranges and Lemons

Towards sunset, as I was walking along a street, I heard a woman's voice say, " Orange-seller! "

I looked up, and on a balcony I saw Carmen looking out, beside a scarlet-coated officer with gold epaulettes, curly hair, and all the appearance of a rich milord. As for her, she was magnificently dressed, a shawl hung on her shoulders, she'd a gold comb in her hair, everything she wore was of silk; and the cunning little wretch, not a bit altered, was laughing till she held her sides. The Englishman shouted to me in mangled Spanish to come upstairs as the lady wanted some oranges, and Carmen said to me in Basque:

" Come up, and don't look astonished at anything! " . . .

" What does he say? " inquired the Englishman.

" He says he's thirsty and would like a drink," answered Carmen, and she threw herself back upon a sofa, screaming with laughter at her own translation.

. . . While I was drinking she said to me:

" Do you see that ring he has on his finger? If you like I'll give it to you."

And I answered, " I would give one of my fingers to have your milord on the mountains, and each of us with a *maquila* in his fist."

" Maquila, what does that mean? " asked the Englishman.

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"Maquila," said Carmen, still laughing, "means an orange. Isn't it a queer word for an orange?"

PROSPER MERIMÉE, *Carmen*

Vitamin C

If I were yonder orange tree
And thou the blossom blooming there
I would not yield a breath of thee
To scent the most imploring air!

THOMAS MOORE, *If I Were Yonder Wave*

That Uncertain Peeling

Madame, sorrowing, agreed to see Armand once more before he left Paris. Up the back stairs he came, smuggled from corner to corner by Anne-Constance de Montalais, and gained Henriette's *cabinet*. They had scarcely time to clasp hands before Monsieur was sighted approaching down the corridor. With a seasoned soldier's presence of mind, Armand met the crisis by climbing into the chimney.

Philippe frittered around the room inspecting his chin for pimples in this mirror and that, lolled on the couches, riffled through books and put them down, and finally selected a Spanish orange and began peeling it. As he approached the fireplace to throw the remnants away, Anne-Constance pounced on him, crying out, "My prince, don't throw that peeling away! It's the part I like!" He graciously gave it to her and she ate it bravely. Madame, who had been on the point of pretending a faint, recovered her composure, and in a few moments managed to decoy Philippe into the next room while De Guiche made his escape.

JOAN SANDERS, *The Devoted Mistress*

Orange-Blossom

O love, what hours were thine and mine,
In lands of palm and southern pine;
In lands of palm, and orange-blossom,
Of olive, aloe, maize, and vine.

ALFRED TENNYSON, *The Daisy*

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Golden Apples of the Hesperides

" You was on top of one of those ruddy great railway delivery vans, 'orse-drawn," he said at last. " You was in tight trousers, and you 'ad a pinky bow in your 'air, and you was eatin' a bite of bread and Bovril."

" Marmite," she corrected him, laughing.

" So it was, I dare say," he agreed. " We was 'eld up in the traffic for an hour and an 'arf outside the old Mansion 'Ouse . . ."

" You was in your bus . . ."

" Call it a car, missis." He was affronted. " That was 'is Lordship 'ere's reconditioned second-'and mechanic's snip. I was in me shover's uniform . . ."

" I know you was," she said. " It's years and donkey's years ago. Fancy you rememberin'. I frew you an orange."

Mr. Lugg raised a hand as large as a Bath Chap. " You frew me a happle, my girl," he said, " and don't you forget it."

MARGERY ALLINGHAM, *The Beckoning Lady*

Speaking of Oranges

I was speaking of oranges to a lady
of great goodness when O the lovely

giraffes came. Soon it was all their
splendour about us and my throat

ached with the voice of great larks.
O the giraffes were so beautiful as

if they meant to stagger us by such
overwhelming vision: Let us give

each a rose said my beautiful lady . . .

JOSÉ GARCIA VILLA, *Have Come, Am Here*

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THUNDER GORGE

The roar had become a song
that warmed his bones

BY HAL G. EVARTS

IN OUR village we have many legends, for Tibet, as you know, is a land of legends. Some go back to the dawn of time, while others, like that of the old man and the tree, happened only yesterday. Doubters may question and scoff, but remember, you seekers of truth, the precept of Buddha: Believe and thou shalt be thrice blessed.

Tekan Sorbu, the holy man, was not actually a resident of the village. He dwelt on the cliff above. But his habits were known to all. Every morning he observed the same ritual. After an hour of meditation he breakfasted on a barley cake and emerged from his hut to his shrine overlooking the gorge of Tata Ho. Throughout the day he sat here beneath the tree, regardless of weather. He was a very old man, some said the oldest living creature in the province, older than the great tree itself; yet there was vigour still in his stooped body, vitality in the brown wrinkled face. From under the cowl of his cloak his eyes looked out upon the world with serenity—a man of inward peace.

That was before the invader came.

On this particular day he was sorely troubled. The summer rains had set in, a steady grey drizzle, but the boughs of the pine kept him dry. They had sheltered him for years, from rain and snow, from sun glare and dust. The huge trunk broke the force of storms that often howl across our mountains.

"Old tree," he said with affection, and rubbed a hand across the rough, thick bark. "Old friend."

He set out his alms bowl and counted off the beads of his rosary, chanting the incantation for each of the one hundred and eight. He straightened the prayer flag and began to rotate his wheel from left to right. "Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus," he intoned, moving his lips over toothless gums. "Let there be an end to violence and blood-letting, an end to killing in the land."

Far down the road, deep in the gorge below, a cowbell tinkled. Few travellers passed his way any more, not since the trouble had started several moons ago, but this one came each morning, up

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from the village, and returned each night from the meadows above. Tekan watched three yaks plod up the steep, narrow road along the cliff face, followed by a sturdy figure in cape and boots. Beside the shrine this herder drew to a halt and placed a stone on top of the mound.

Pink bloomed in her cheeks from the exertion of the climb, and when she thrust back her hood, moisture sparkled in her braided black hair. The girl-woman, this yakherd, Kaya, who might have been three generations distant, brightened all the day with her youth.

"Greetings, child," he said. "The heavens shine upon you."

From some recess of her garment she drew a pat of freshly churned butter and laid it in his bowl. With downcast eyes she murmured, "Thank you, gracious lord."

Such honorifics embarrassed him, for he was not an ordained lama, but the villagers had reverence for any man of piety. "You are too generous. Only yesterday you brought me tea."

"To nourish the soul," she quoted, "one must also feed the flesh."

"True, and for this gift I bless you." Waiting for Kaya to respond, he saw that her eyes were swollen with weeping, and he sighed. To be young was seldom easy, and for young lovers these cruel times were the seventh pit of darkness. "But smiles are likewise food. Can you not spare one?"

Her lips quivered. "There is trouble in the village again. At the bridge. More soldiers have arrived."

"They harmed you?"

"No, not that. But you must help me!"

"Whatever one feeble old man can do, consider done."

"You are wise and compassionate, lord."

"Age is not wisdom," he said. "But come now, tell me of your man."

Kaya stared at him in wonderment. "You know about Dorje?"

Tekan shook his head. Dorje Goze had been the village blacksmith until the Red Chinese came once more in force. There had been much fighting, the bridge destroyed, and Dorje had fled to the mountains where he now lived in hiding with the guerrillas. "I know only that he is young and hot-blooded and the most fortunate of men."

"Last night—" her voice faltered —"he came to me, to my house. Dorje himself. He slipped past their guards into the village."

Tekan Sorbu drew a deep breath. Chinese troops occupied the village—many troops. Each day armed patrols rode out to

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protect the road and search the countryside for guerrillas. And Dorje Goze, who had a price upon his head, had been rash enough to invade their stronghold. "To court such danger he must love you very much indeed, for which no one can blame him. Where is he now?"

"Hidden on my roof. I begged him to go and take me with him. Together we would be safe in the mountains. But he is more stubborn than any yak. He has a plan, some desperate scheme."

"A plan?"

"He would not tell me what. But he must not do this thing. He will be caught and executed. Talk to him, lord. Stop him. To you he will listen."

"You wish me to go to him in the village?"

Kaya covered her face with her hands and nodded mutely.

Tekan closed his eyes, feeling the thin dry lids, like ancient parchment. The passions of war and desire and hatred no longer had the power to move him. His blood was watered wine; for too long his concerns had been of another world. But a dim memory stirred in him.

"And do you love this smith in return?"

"Oh yes!" she breathed. "He is my sun, my life!"

"Go along then to your grazing. No more tears. We will talk again tonight."

After Kaya had clattered off with her yaks, he rested his head against the pine. Rain pattered down among the needles, and far below the waters of the mighty Tata Ho flung back their song as they raced through the gorge. By ear he could recognise the river's moods, her quiet periods as well as her tantrums. He had spent a lifetime listening. She was restive now, swollen with child of the melting snows, chafing to give birth and burst forth to the sea. Her time, he knew, was almost upon her.

"Perhaps mine, too, has come, old tree," he said, and tapped the gnarled ropy roots. "You will outlast me yet."

He gathered his cloak about him and padded down the road, leaning on his staff. The cobbles were wet and slippery, worn smooth by the traffic of centuries, and mist hid the village. He could not recall when he last had visited there or left his shrine untended.

With explosives the Chinese had widened the roadway to make passage for their trucks and wheeled vehicles. They had brought many changes from their lowlands. Presently a patrol mounted on jeeps crawled by, spewing out fumes that made him cough. Pressed against the cliff, he watched their grinning faces, their tools of death. They knew him and called out coarse jokes as

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they passed, but he did not think of them as the enemy. They were mortals like himself, men of another faith or perhaps no faith at all.

Pausing often to rest, he climbed down to the river bottom and the edge of the village. Here, where the river pinched in to its narrowest channel between two granite ribs, a new bridge spanned the gorge, replacing the old swaying suspension bridge of iron chains that he had known. He studied the marvel of it, this airy structure of arches and girders and pilings. Truly the Chinese were clever. Like ants they swarmed over the great beams, scores of them, working, working.

Kaya's small house stood at the far side of the village. Behind the parapet of the roof he must look for Dorje Goze. But to go there directly might arouse suspicion. Soldiers seemed everywhere about, on guard with long knives fastened to their rifles. Only a few Tibetans moved along the one street, mostly women and children. The younger men, men of fighting age, either had escaped to the mountains or been deported. Holding out his bowl, Tekan shuffled forward.

Before he had gone many steps two soldiers seized him by the arms. He did not resist their search. They pushed him roughly towards a building over which fluttered the foreign flag with a star of blood red. Inside he stood with bowed head, silent, surrounded by a ring of curious Chinese, until he was led into a smaller room furnished with a desk and chair.

The single occupant, a young, moon-faced man in uniform, continued reading some papers for several minutes before glancing up. With a faint smile he examined Tekan at leisure. "What do you want, beggar?"

It was a deliberate insult. No Tibetan would have used that word. But Tekan answered quietly, "I want nothing, Excellence."

"Nothing?" The other's eyebrows lifted. "Perhaps you come to see our new bridge."

"It is a very handsome bridge."

"You like it, eh? You must be the holy man from the cliff. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Chen of the engineer corps. I designed and built this bridge which you admire."

"I stand humble in your presence," Tekan said. Through the window he could see the roof-line of Kaya's house. For her, and for her lover, he feared this smiling, silken-voiced colonel of engineers. Far better that he had stayed away.

"So at last we meet," the colonel said. "I have heard some wondrous tales of your powers."

"I have no power but prayer."

"You disappoint me. Your neighbours swear that you

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possess the evil eye and gifts of black magic; that you cast out devils. Some say that you have put a curse upon my bridge."

"They are simple people, Excellence, as I am a simple man."

"Come now," the colonel said playfully. "I won't reveal your secrets. Give me a sample of your art. Cast a spell."

Tekan swallowed and said nothing. For the first time in more years than he could count he felt the hot prick of an almost forgotten sensation—anger, a strange, unseemly emotion of which he was ashamed.

"Then I will perform a trick for you." As the colonel stood up his manner changed abruptly. "Look out of that window, you filthy, ignorant fakir. Tell me what you see."

Tekan tried to still the trembling in his legs. Was it anger, fear, exhaustion? Outside, the mud-brown river boiled and surged with thunderous power, carrying a flood-stage burden of driftwood and debris almost to the high-water scar. In all Tibet never had there been such a bridge as this which defied Tata Ho. "I see the bridge," he said.

"Also you see the road. The Amban Road. The great high road from Peking to Lhasa, built a thousand years before you and I were born. In a few days my bridge will be finished and the road reopened to travel. It, too, will last a thousand years."

"With God's will," Tekan said. "In my lifetime, however, I have seen three bridges destroyed here."

"Not this one!" A wildness came to the colonel's eyes, the fire of a fanatic. "You barbarians will not destroy *my* bridge."

"The river is the true destroyer, not man."

"Listen well to me. I am an engineer of the New China. I do not build bridges that can be washed away. I spit on your devils and curses. For one reason only have I spared your carcass."

Tekan remained silent. Nothing he might say would reach this man, who knew all and understood nothing.

"Each day you sit up there and watch my soldiers, my bridge, my labour battalions. These things you report to your guerrilla friends. Now give them this message from me."

Tekan raised a hand in protest, but the colonel cut him short. "Tell these vermin I want them to attack my bridge. I welcome them. I invite them! To their death. Now climb back to your perch, old man. Stay there. If you return to the village to spy again, I will have you shot."

Slowly Tekan walked back up the road, feeling the weight of his years, heavy with defeat. He dared not so much as glance back at Kaya's house now. He had failed her. Perhaps the soldiers had already discovered her young man. If that came to

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pass, how could he sustain her through the agony of her grief?

In early evening he finally reached his shrine again and sank down on the rocks. The rain had stopped, the mist had blown away and the distant peaks stood revealed, blazing in the sunset under their eternal cap of ice. It was a barren scene, treeless except for his lone towering pine, but from it he drew renewed strength and comfort as he prayed. Afterwards he sat listening to the sounds of twilight—the croak of a jackdaw in flight, a marmot's piping whistle, the endless sullen grumble of the river.

Presently, when he heard an approaching bell, he roused himself, gathered twigs, and struck fire with flint and steel. By the time Kaya arrived, leading her yaks, he had brewed a pot of tea, richly flavoured with salt and butter. He handed her a bowl and shook his head, wincing at the stricken look on her face.

"I will go to him!" she cried. "He must be in trouble."

"Wait, child." Tekan touched her hand. "Not yet.– If he has been found in your house, it will be unsafe to return."

They waited together while dusk melted into night, and he lit the butter lamp in his hut. The Chinese patrol clanked past, empty-handed after a day's search, and descended towards the village. Fresh storm clouds gathered to the west. On the horizon lightning flickered and rent the sky. Not even scalding tea could thaw the chill which crept into his bones.

Hours later a pebble rattled against the hut wall, and a tall figure climbed over the cliff edge and stepped into the circle of light. With a cry of joy Kaya sprang to her feet. Carefully Dorje Goze put down the sack he had been carrying on his back. Seizing Kaya about the waist, he swung her into the air. "Little one!" he boomed. "You are still here."

He was a big rollicking man with a smile that would set any girl's heart afire. The glow in Kaya's eyes was a sight to behold. But womanlike she snapped, "Set me down, you brainless donkey! Where have you been all this day, while I died ten thousand times?"

Dorje threw back his head and laughed. "Already you sound like a wife. In the village, little one. I had business there. After dark I slipped out again, as I slipped in. The Red monkeys hear no evil, see no evil."

"Tell this foolish man of mine," she said to Tekan. "Tell him what you learnt today."

Dorje turned. "Are you about to scold me, too, Grandfather?"

Tekan smiled. "Scold you? No. I salute your courage. But does this business concern the bridge?"

"It does." Dorje's face sobered, and he toed the sack at his

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feet. "Here is explosive. I stole ten boxes from their storehouse and hid the rest. Tomorrow night we return, a hundred strong, and blow their bridge to bits."

Kaya gasped, "You will be butchered! All of you."

"That is the risk of war," Dorje said gravely.

"Kaya is right," Tekan said. "It is a Chinese trap. And if you do succeed, they will only rebuild the bridge."

"Then I or someone else will destroy it again. And again. Until they are driven from our village."

"But why must it be you?" Kaya's voice quavered. "There are others who will fight. You swear you love me, but—"

"Hush, little one." Dorje tilted up her chin with a finger. "You know my heart. But would you have me hide behind a woman? Even one such as you?"

His voice was gentle, tender with love, and infinitely sad. But his jaw was set as hard as stone. With a sigh, Tekan looked at Kaya's face, from which all life had drained. They had forgotten him. But somehow he must find a way to melt this rock of a man.

"You go now?" she whispered. "So soon?"

"I cannot desert my comrades. They depend on me." Dorje backed to the door.

"Wait." Tekan fingered his beads as the idea took on substance. Any appeal would be futile. In some ways Dorje seemed not unlike the Chinese colonel. Both were young and dedicated to a cause. For them he knew a kind of pity. But for Kaya, weeping softly in the shadows, he felt a deep, aching compassion. "Surely you have a moment to refresh yourself before setting out on such a stormy night."

Hastily, he rummaged in a dark corner of the hut, then turned back with a third bowl. He filled it from the pot of lukewarm tea and handed it to Dorje. With a finger Dorje stirred the thick black brew, took a sip, and gulped it down. "Dorje Goze, I would tell you a little tale."

"Make it short. I've a long road to travel before dawn."

Never had Tekan felt more weary, but he spoke in a light, clear voice, hugging his chest to ward off the cold. "This happened long ago. There was a young man full of learning and pride and self-importance. He, too, fell in love with a girl of great beauty and she with him, or so it appeared."

"You knew this girl?" Kaya interrupted.

"You remind me of her, child. Well, they were happy in their love, planning marriage and many children. Then one day, without warning, she ran off with a trader from Batang. The young man was thunderstruck—with rage, with fury. He knew no forgiveness. Lust for revenge burnt in him."

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Dorje made an impatient gesture. "Get on with it. I am late."

"He pursued the couple. In a lonely camp on the grasslands he overtook them. With his sword he slew the trader, before the eyes of his beloved. He gloated in his vengeance."

"The girl?" Kaya asked, shivering. "Did she go back to the young man?"

Tekan rubbed a hand over his eyes. Outside the hut lightning flashed and thunder boomed over the peaks. "No, the girl fled from him as she would flee a monster. He never saw her again. Before many days she died of grief, broken by the tragedy."

"And did he die too?"

"From that time," Tekan went on, "he became a pariah. All men turned against him. But he could not escape himself in death. He knew he must replace life with life, or suffer through eternity. So he travelled to the sacred forest of Tien Shan, seeking enlightenment. There he dug up a seedling. This tiny plant he carried back to the village of the girl and planted it, where no other trees grew. Through the years he kept this sapling alive, watered it with his tears and warmed it with his body, as you would succour a sickly child, until at last it gained strength and grew into a mighty pine. This was his penance."

"This tree, lord? *Your* tree?" said Kaya.

Dorje snorted. "It is only a tale. Why tell me this?"

"The young man," Tekan said, "had no understanding of the nature of love, you see. Violence ruled his mind, and in violence he destroyed his soul. Do not you, Dorje Goze, commit such error. Do not close your heart to love."

"I would have done the same," Dorje retorted. "At least your young man proved he was a man."

"Take me with you!" Kaya clung to him. "I beg you, Dorje! Do not leave me behind again."

Gently but firmly Dorje pushed her away and shouldered his bag. "Look after her for me, Grandfather."

Tekan nodded. "As my very own."

Watching anxiously, he saw Dorje pause in the doorway. Perspiration beaded the young man's face, and a film glazed his eyes. He mumbled something incoherent, and the sack slipped from his fingers. With a lurch he slumped forward to the earthen floor and rolled over on to his back.

Kaya darted forward and knelt beside him. His eyes were closed and he was breathing heavily, like a man in deep slumber. She pinched his cheeks, shook him in panic. "He—he is sick!"

"Not sick," Tekan said. "Asleep. For several hours. He will awake no worse for the experience."

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"You?" Her eyes grew round with disbelief. "You did this?"

"I put a pinch of harmless powder in his tea."

"But why? Why?"

"Try to trust me," Tekan said soothingly. "Then try to forgive me. You saw that I could not persuade him. So you must take him away from here at once. To the mountains, among his friends. They will take care of him, and of you too."

Her face twisted. "But he will be furious when he wakes. He will come storming back—"

"Perhaps by then," Tekan said, "he will have a change of heart. Come now. Hurry."

In bewilderment she helped him drag Dorje from the hut out into the road. Together they struggled to lift his limp body on to the back of the largest yak. With a piece of thong round the beast's belly they secured him in place. Overhead, wind soughed through the treetop. A peal of thunder made Kaya jump. "That story, lord, about the young man and the girl he loved, and the tree? You told it only to detain Dorje until the powder worked. It never really happened, did it?"

Tekan lifted one shoulder in the barest shrug. "Who can say? Safe journey, child. The heavens shine upon you and your man."

"You will not come with us?"

"No, I remain. There is—" he smiled faintly—"a demon I must exorcise."

He slapped the yak's rump, and the little caravan lumbered up the road and out of sight, swallowed by the night. He waited until the tinkle of the bell faded, then turned back to his shrine. Boughs clacked and groaned in the wind, and thunder rumbled over the gorge. The first drops of rain pelted his face.

Hauling Dorje's sack from the hut, he set about his task. He had watched the Chinese do this more than once, but his fingers were awkward, stiff with age. Daylight was not far off before he finished. For the second time that night he knelt down and struck fire from flint and steel. "Forgive me, old friend," he said, and peered up at the trunk. "Forgive us both."

An hour after dawn, having completed his devotions, Tekan Sorbu ate a barley cake, although he was not hungry, and emerged from the hut. Sitting crosslegged beside the shrine, he was ready for another day. Rain beat down, soaking through to his skin, but he did not seek shelter. With head bent, he listened intently to the Tata Ho and the story she could tell him.

Mist hid the river far below, but her voice rose from the gorge in full roar. She was angry, raging, insane with pain, a monumental force in labour. Only once or twice before had he heard

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her bellow with such fury. He closed his eyes and waited, but did not drowse, for the very old require little sleep.

A long time later a Chinese patrol in jeeps crept up the road. They slowed, stopped, and a soldier climbed out. He stared at the crater in the rocky earth, at the jagged blackened stump of what had been a mighty pine. He sniffed its charred odour. "What happened here, old man?" he demanded. "Where is the tree?"

"Did you not hear the thunder?" Tekan said. "Have you never seen a bolt of lightning from the sky?"

Awe came into the soldier's eyes, and he popped a hand over his mouth. Edging forward, he peered over the cliff down into the gorge. "The tree!" he cried to his companions, and pointed. "It fell into the river. It was the tree that smashed the bridge. Lightning struck it."

Busy telling his beads, Tekan paid no heed. The soldier shouted at him. "Do you hear me, old man? This tree, or one like it, wedged against the bridge supports. It caused a log jam from wall to wall that dammed up the river. The bridge went out like a straw."

Slowly and calmly Tekan raised his eyes to the soldier's face. They held a strange, deep light that made the other back in alarm. These people, Tekan thought, do not believe in devils nor in miracles. They had come warring from the east before and would again, but always in the end the land defeated them.

"I hear you," he said. "Tell your colonel of engineers I pray for his enlightenment."

After the patrol had gone he pulled his cloak about him and leaned against the splintered stump, huddled in the rain. The roar of Tata Ho had become a song once more, a song that warmed his very bones. He thought of Kaya and her love, who surely must be safe by now. And looking back through a haze of yesterdays he saw for an instant another soft, dark-eyed face, radiant with youth.

This is our legend, one to cherish in the black days ahead. Perhaps you question it, for no one can prove that it happened just so. But this much is certain. The bridge is gone, the tree is gone, but the old man still is there, sitting by his shrine in all weathers to bless travellers. Whatever his sins of the past, he has paid his penance in full.

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Many a live wire would be a dead one except for his connections.

WILSON MIZNER

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Cricket on the Hearth

Wet weather or fine, ours is an easy wicket, and you can settle to the bowling in either armchair or deckchair, so over to you. Stumped? Brows creased? Back to the pavilion on page 143

1. *What is a Wicket-Maiden?*
2. *The grandson of a famous poet played for England early this century. Can you name him?*
3. *Which famous character ordained that a cricket ground should be added to every military barracks?*
4. *What is the date of the earliest surviving cricket bat?*
5. *Who said:*
   a. He has knocked down the wicket
   And broke the stumps
   And runs without shoes to save his pumps.
   b. 'Oo am I to be put off my stroke, Mum,
   becos a few 'ooligans boos?
   An Englishman's crease is 'is castle,
   I shall stay here as long as I choose.
6. *When did cricket cease to be unlawful?*
7. *In which country was a series of five Test matches first introduced?*
8. *Who said, "Cricket is an idea—an idea of the Gods."*
9. *The Gabba is:*
   a. a form of googly;
   b. the name given to the pitch at Brisbane;
   c. a Caribbean cricket team?

Memo to Argosy readers: If you have a favourite sport, why not send us a quiz on it? We'll pay two guineas for seven sporting questions (and answers) that are lively, correct, and not too difficult to solve.

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BOTTLE PARTY

A huge grin split his face—
his eyes shone like candle-flames

BY KEN HARDMAN

IT WAS a long time before big Evan came round, what with all the wine he had drunk, topped off by the thump on the jaw from the biggest of the three men. I had tried to help him in the fight, goodness knows—but one of the men had slapped me on the side of the head until I heard bells ringing, and bawled something about nino, which is the Spanish for child.

I may not be very big for sixteen years old, but I had given the man the toe of my boot hard up against his shin, and he had hopped around like a big dancing bear before clouting me smack in the eye with such force that I sat down all of a sudden on the hard cobbles.

And there I had stayed, not taking much interest in anything else until big Evan landed beside me, all of a heap and breathing heavy.

Then the three men had gone away into the darkness, talking at the top of their lungs and very excited in the South American way. Maybe they were arguing over what the fight had been about, for I am sure that I don't know to this day. I have a suspicion, though, that Evan had been trying to get off with the big fellow's girlfriend in the last bar on the road back to the ship.

Anyway, there we were in the little dark alley, Evan all sprawled out with his great golden head resting against my knees, and me feeling as if I had walked into a wall and wishing I was back in my bunk.

At the end of our alley was a main street, all brightly lit and noisy with talking people and hooting cars. A bit of ghostly light filtered up to us, making the cobbles of the place look like a million little hump-backed dwarfs swarming over the floor. There wasn't enough light for anyone walking along the main street to see us by, but I was scared that one of the funny-dressed policemen might take it into his head to stroll round the back streets like they do at home.

So after a while I pulled myself together and began to shake Evan as hard as I could. It was like trying to shake a double-

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bed mattress, springs and all; his head lolled as though it was on a rubber stick, and for a terrible minute I thought maybe he was dead. But then I saw a little trickle of blood coming from the corner of his mouth and running away down his chin, and that comforted me because I had read somewhere that dead men don't bleed at all.

I slapped his face—lightly, mind; for he is an Able Seaman and not a man for a boy to be taking liberties with—and pinched his nose until he spluttered for breath. And all the time I had a wary eye on the crowds flowing past on the main street. They didn't seem to be going anywhere. The time must have been close on midnight, but they just strolled along as though it was a Sunday afternoon in the park. While my thoughts were far away—I was wondering if people ever go to bed in South America—I gave Evan an extra hard slap and he woke up.

Evan waking up is a sight never to be forgotten. He is all shoulders and legs, struggling like a wounded horse trying to get to its feet. I jumped clear until he had finished taking turns out of himself on the slippery cobbles, then I grabbed his arm.

"Steady, Evan," I said.

"Who's that?" He spoke in Welsh, which was strange, because he never would speak Welsh aboard the ship—not even to me, the only other Welshman aboard.

He peered down at me, for I was still squatting on the cobbles out of the way of his flailing arms. His broad, blue-shirted shoulders were silhouetted against the bright light of the street.

"Oh—it's you, young Idris," he said. "What the devil are you doing down there?"

For a moment I could have kicked his shin as I had done to the other man.

"You have only just got up from down here, Evan Williams," I said with some heat, "and but for me you would still be here—or more likely in some smelly gaol."

"Oh," he said, thinking. Then he clapped a big hand to his forehead. "Of course—I remember now—there were at least six of them."

"Three," I said.

"At least six," he continued firmly. "But we showed them, eh lad?"

"We showed them until we were flat on our backs," I said.

"Hm!" He eyed me closely, not knowing if I meant to be impudent or not. "You have a black eye, lad," he said at last. "A steak is what you'll be wanting."

I stood up with a fine air of indifference. "It's nothing," I assured him. "Are we going back to the ship now?"

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"Wait a minute." He wiped the blood off his chin thoughtfully. "I am a bit hazy about what went on before the fight. Have you been with me all night, lad?"

I smiled at his foolishness; it's funny what drink can do to a man.

"No," I said patiently. "I was coming back from the pictures, and I heard you in the bar yonder. You were singing."

"Ho," he grinned. "Singing, was I? And how did it sound?"

He was fishing for a compliment, because he knew very well that when he sang the world stood still to listen.

"Not bad," I said, for I had no words to describe the wild beauty of the singing that had stopped me dead in my tracks. "I came over to the bar door to see what was going on, and then you stopped singing and came out with a rush through the swing-doors, with these three men following you up close. What did you do to them?"

He didn't answer the question, but began to nod his head slowly. "Aye, that's the way of it," he said. A thought struck him and he banged away at the pockets of his faded blue dungarees. "My bottle," he said, like a man who has just lost a fortune. "Where's my bottle?"

"What bottle?" I asked.

He was down on his haunches, peering around on the cobbles. "Did you see me bring a bottle out of that place—a big, lovely bottle all covered with wickerwork?"

"I did not," I answered. "Was it full?"

He gave me a look of such withering scorn that I thought he was going to bite me. "Of course it was full; what would I be doing with an empty one?"

He stood up slowly. "I must've left it in there," he said, and there was such anguish in his voice.

"Never mind your old bottle," I told him, "let's get back to the ship."

He hitched up his dungarees like a pirate tightening his swordbelt. "I'm going back all right," he said. "Back into that bar for my bottle!" He turned and stormed back along the alley, away from the bright street lights, with me hopping along at his heels.

"But, Evan," I panted, "maybe those three men are still there. You'll only get done over again. Listen to me, will you?"

He looked down at me, not pausing in his stride. "It is a question of honour, young Idris," he said, with a great show of pride. "I will not have them drinking my bottle that I paid good money for. You go back to the ship now. I shall manage all

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right." He sounded like a martyr. " But before you go, have you any manhole-covers left? "

I dug in my pocket and brought out two of the big silver coins of the country. " I have these," I said, " and I'm not going back until you do."

" Hm! " He considered the matter for a moment, his feet still pounding along and the bar entrance a pale blur in the distance.

" You are not to drink any strong liquor, mind," he said at last. " You understand we will have to buy a drink when we go in there. A very beautiful lady owns the place, and it is not seemly just to go in, get the bottle, and come straight out again."

I didn't see why not, but kept my mouth shut.

" You can have a lemonade or something," he went on grandly, forgetting that my money would be buying it. " And if you see any trouble starting, get out quickly. Do you understand, now? "

I nodded dumbly. The first fine thrill of being ashore with the notorious Taffy Williams was wearing off and I was more than a little scared. I already had one black eye.

The bar had bat-wing doors, like those you see in the cowboy films. Evan never even checked his stride; he breasted through the doors as if they weren't there, with me so close behind him that we both got through before they swung together again.

It was a long low room with a dirty flagged floor and half a dozen rough wooden tables. The only light was from a bare electric bulb above the bar at the top end of the room, and that was so dim that I could hardly make out anything at first.

Two things didn't need seeing, though: the strong smell of strange tobacco and the brooding silence of the place.

Evan paused just inside the room and the only sound was that of the doors clicking to a standstill behind us. Then, after a long minute, a chair scraped on the stone floor.

I had hoped that they might have gone home, for it was very late. But with the scrape of the chair to guide me, I made them out, sitting like great dark vultures round one of the tables.

In the centre of the table stood a big bottle of a shape much sought after for making table-lamps. It was covered with wicker-work.

Evan gurgled deep in his throat, and I knew that he too had seen the bottle. And then I noticed that there were four figures at the table. The fourth one was a woman—it was her chair that had scraped as she stood up.

She walked slowly towards us, her heels clicking on the stone floor. I could see her properly now, and she was beautiful, with

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long shining black hair and a black dress that clung skin-tight to her body. She was smiling at Evan, and I could understand her smile, for Evan is a golden giant of a man with the looks of a movie star.

"So," she said, "my singer has come back." Her voice was low, and she spoke English with a strong lilting accent something like my own.

Evan practically ignored her; his angry eyes never left the big bottle on the table. "Maria," he said in a terrible voice, "did you help them to drink my wine?"

"Calm yourself, big one." She stopped in front of him, her arms akimbo and her head tossed back, looking like one of those Spanish dancers. "There are other bottles. How do you think my friends do not get up and beat you again, huh?"

I was wondering the same thing myself. The three men at the table hadn't moved a muscle.

"I am ready for them," Evan said, very cold and distant.

"Imbecile!" She gave a little stamp of her foot. "Can you not see they are all asleep from the drink?"

It was true. Evan and I approached the table slowly and saw them sprawled in their chairs like big rag dolls. The one who had hit me was snoring gently. Tenderly, Evan lifted the bottle; it was quite empty.

Maria came up behind us. "You see," she said. "Oh, they came back with a big story of how they beat you and six more of your ship-friends. I do not believe them—pft! I know that my singer will come back. I let them drink your bottle, for it was a strong wine and already they had drunk much." Her dark eyes glowed in triumph. "Am I not clever, big one? Now, the night is ours."

I looked up at Evan. A huge grin split his face and his eyes sparkled like two candle-flames. "You little devil," he said.

And then they both seemed to notice me, as though I had just walked into the place.

"The young one is a ship-friend of yours?" Maria asked. "His eye is black."

I blushed furiously and Evan laughed. "He is a countryman of mine, Maria," he informed her, "and worth six men. He alone helped me against those three."

"They hit such a nino? Bah! I spit on them." And she did. "Throw them out, big one," she said.

Evan rubbed his hands together and said, "The pleasure is mine."

The trio slept on as Evan dragged them one by one through the bat-wing doors. The screech and bump of their heels across the

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floor was a very satisfying sound. When he was out dumping the last one, Maria grasped my arm.

"Come here, young one," she whispered. She drew me over to the bar, went behind the counter, and reached up on a high shelf. "Take this back to your ship; it is for your friend, and maybe you can have a little sip too—no?"

She thrust a twin brother of the wicker-covered bottle into my arms and the weight of it nearly carried me through the floor.

"Go quickly," she urged.

I turned and walked towards the entrance. Evan was standing in the doorway with a hand on each leaf of the doors.

"You off now, Idris?" he asked casually, looking over my head at Maria. "Mind how you go with that bottle, then. I'll see you tomorrow."

He stepped out of my way. "And if the mate asks where I am, you don't know—see?" I nodded, and he patted my shoulder. "Away now," he said.

When I was a little way down the alley, stumbling over the cobbles with the bottle clutched tight to my chest, I heard the wild, soaring tenor of Evan's singing rushing through the darkness and away to the narrow strip of starlit sky above my head.

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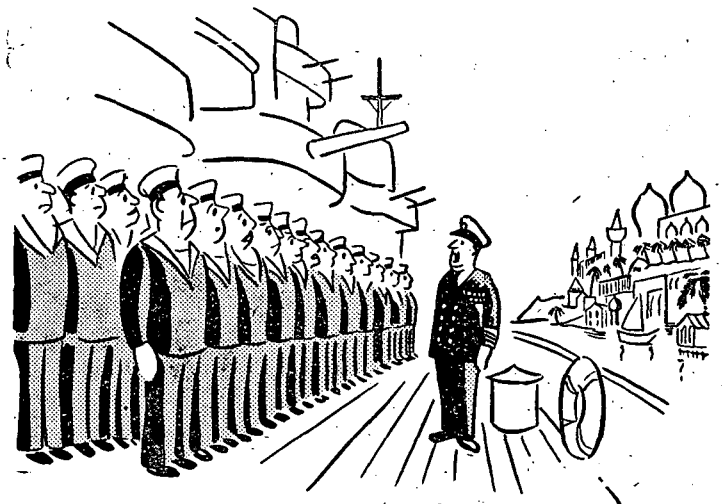

"We're here on what is known as a 'goodwill visit.' I'm afraid shore leave for you men will be out of the question."

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WITCHES OF BERRIMBOOLA

" All is now clear," he said, and gave me my banjo

BY G. DALTON HOOKER

THE DAY the Texan twisted his ankle outside our front gate, I was in the living-room with my sister, Dolly.

We both heard the bump and we both looked up, Dolly from her sewing, I from my book of chess problems. We didn't jump up, though, it was too hot. Nobody moves fast in Berrimboola, it's that sort of town.

Then my other sister, Patsy, wandered in from the hall. " Bill," she said to me, " a man's sitting in the road outside our gate."

" Oh. Who? " asked Dolly.

That, better than anything, will show how blasé my sisters were. To do them justice, minor accidents at our gate were not unusual. It's a nasty bit of road. It was surprising though, after Patsy and Dolly grew up, how many young men fell off bicycles or came over faint outside our place. It was a recognised way of making our acquaintance.

Led by me, we all moved out to see who it was this time who had had the accident. On the way, Patsy remarked, " He has jet black hair."

Margaret Peters, who lived with her father next door to us, had also come out to see what had happened. But I was first on the scene.

It had become apparent to me that the cause of the accident was my rake, which I had left outside the night before when I was tidying the grass. I picked it up and chucked it quickly into our garden.

" Are you feeling all right? " I inquired of the Texan, who had by now regained his feet. He looked at me coldly, but said nothing. I daresay he had noticed my manœuvre with the rake.

Well, we took him into our place—not into Margaret's because her father hated having visitors—and we sat him down and soothed him. He was pretty well recovered now, though he looked dazed. This I put down to the effect of Patsy and Dolly

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rather than to the accident. Patsy and Dolly are generally accepted as raving beauties. My sisters, for their part, were clearly very impressed by him, as also was Margaret.

Then, all of a sudden, the three girls vanished into the kitchen to make tea.

I sat down. "You're new here, aren't you?" I asked our stranger. "I'd say you're an American. You're here for the Berrimboola Festival? Or have you bought a farm?"

"You are right on most counts," he replied, quite friendly now. "I am from Texas, U.S.A. My name is Myron Guthrie. I have been in Berrimboola four hours, and I intend to stay about a week. I am covering your 'Back to Berrimboola' Festival for my paper, so that people in America will know something about life in a small Australian town. Next question?"

When I said nothing, he indicated my chessboard and the book beside it. "Is chess popular among Australian youth?"

"No, not really," I told him. "I'm about the only person who plays here. Except Mr. Peters, of course."

I couldn't help sighing, and he asked me at once, "Why the sigh?"

"Well, it's no secret, I suppose. Mr. Peters is a very good player. He's the father of the other girl who came out. They live next door. I intend to marry Margaret, but first I have to beat her father at chess. He's made it a rule."

He looked puzzled. "Isn't she—Miss Peters—a little, well, old for you?"

"At the moment, yes. She's twenty, I'm nearly sixteen. But in ten years she'll be thirty to my twenty-six, and so on." I had given the matter a lot of careful thought. "It's simply a matter of proportion," I pointed out.

"I follow. Tell me, Mr. Mason—"

"Bill's the name."

"Tell me, Bill, what's it like to live surrounded by beautiful women? I saw another one a moment ago, out in the garden. How many sisters have you got, for Pete's sake?"

I laughed. "That's my Aunt Agnes, Mrs. Gaffney. She's a widow. She looks after us. We're orphans."

While he was digesting this, all the females trooped in, led by Aunt Agnes. She had overheard the Texan's last remarks and was looking very pleased with herself. She asked him to dinner, which obviously gratified him. We then had morning tea.

"I'm looking forward to tonight," the Texan said, when the time came for him to go. "I appreciate, more than I can say, being invited into an Australian home. That's the sort of thing our readers want, not statistics. And you are a wonderful cook,

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Mrs. Gaffney. It's a long time since I enjoyed such a delicious cake."

"Oh, Dolly made that," beamed my aunt. "She's the best cook in Berrimboola. She'll be making the dinner, too."

The Texan gazed reverently at Dolly, who looked demure, which is always a dangerous sign in this particular sister.

"Oh, but anyone can cook," she said. "You should taste the cakes Patsy makes. Let's give Myron a real Australian dish, shall we? Apple pie. No one can make an apple pie quite like Patsy."

Which was true. Patsy's pies would kill a crocodile.

Poor Patsy smiled in her vague way. Later, she would panic, but not now, not in front of visitors.

As soon as the Texan was gone, Patsy and Dolly had a quarrel out on the back verandah, but it solved nothing: Patsy still had to produce a pie.

I suppose the correct phrase for what Dolly had done is spiking the enemy's guns. She and Patsy always competed for any new man in town, the other girls didn't have a chance. Dolly wanted to put Patsy at a disadvantage with the Texan right from the start, so she could have him. For though Dolly is very beautiful with fair hair and grey eyes and all the rest of it, Patsy is devastating. She has auburn hair and dark blue eyes, but that doesn't describe Patsy. The best way to describe her is to show what effect she has on people.

The last time we went to Sydney for our holiday, we went to Bondi Beach for a swim. Patsy wore her second-best swimsuit, a blue woollen number she'd had for years, but though there was a blonde girl in a satin bikini not ten feet away, it was Patsy who was the belle of the beach. There were photographers there and they all wanted her to pose for them, but she wouldn't, for Berrimboola wouldn't have liked it and Patsy is strictly a Berrimboola girl.

When we went in for our swim, we could hardly move in the water for lifesavers, all hoping to be able to rescue Patsy.

Patsy could have been a model or an actress or anything she liked, but she just doesn't like cities. All Patsy wants is a happy home, her horse Diamond, and wide open spaces. She dotes on Diamond. Whenever she comes back from the city, she always kisses Diamond before any of us humans.

Dolly's appeal is more the homely type. Aunt Agnes was supposed to look after us, but really it was Dolly who did just about everything. She is one of those girls who feel responsible. Aunt Agnes didn't mind. She had two admirers of her own, Mr. Heron who owned a dairy farm and Mr. Larripa who had the general store and the paddock where we kept our horses.

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She could have married either of them any time, but she was having too much fun at our place to settle down.

There were terrible ructions about the pie. Aunt Agnes couldn't help, because she couldn't manage pastry. Dolly would have stepped in if Patsy had asked her, but Patsy wouldn't. She had her pride. At last she went into the kitchen and made a pie, and it looked awful, like a stormy sea. Then, just before the Texan came, Patsy cheered up. We were all very mystified.

We discovered what she had done during the meal. The Texan was pretty hysterical over the chicken-dish Dolly had made, but when he saw the pie his eyes nearly fell out.

As soon as I had my first mouthful, I knew what had happened: Patsy had got a pie from Margaret Peters. I had dinner regularly each week at the Peters' place, as a preliminary to my chess duel with my prospective father-in-law, and I knew Margaret's pies. This was one of her best.

So Patsy came out top. But it didn't last.

After dinner, we sat on the front verandah and talked. It was a terrific evening. In a little while Margaret and her father came over and joined us. Mr. Peters was curious to see more of the Texan. He had already made his acquaintance, in unfortunate circumstances, when I was giving a demonstration of boomerang throws before dinner. One of my throws had gone crazy and the boomerang sliced up Mr. Peters' best rose and only missed him by a whistle, but the Texan managed to soothe him down. This remarkable American proved to be well informed on the matter of flowers, which are Mr. Peters' passion, and he made a very good impression.

"Tell me," said Myron Guthrie, puffing a cigar, "this festival of yours, have many old Berrimboolans come back? Everybody I've spoken to so far seems to live here."

"There's old Mrs. Bromwich," Margaret told him, after a minute's thought. "She's visiting her daughter. And the two Smith boys, though they'd have come anyway for their school holidays. And Mrs. Logan's husband."

We all collapsed into peals of laughter, for Mrs. Logan and her husband are well known locally as the Battlers of Berrimboola. He's always coming or going.

"Then the festival has not succeeded," the Texan persisted, "I mean, *one* isn't much."

"We didn't expect anyone at all to come, really," I explained, "a festival has to have a name, so we called ours 'Back to Berrimboola.' The thing is, everyone around here has had a good year, there's been rain and nobody's died. So we just felt like celebrating. Hence the festival."

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Berrimboola, I must mention, is the centre of a dairy-farming district in Victoria. We, the Masons, have a farm too, but a cousin is share-farming it for us till I grow up.

" What I would like to see," the Texan went on, " is a swaggie. Aren't there any swaggies in Australia any more ? "

" Mr. Peters was a swaggie once," I told him. " During the Depression he humped his bluey all round Australia."

" That's right," Mr. Peters nodded. " There are still some around, Mr. Guthrie, but you don't find them near the towns. It's a hard life. I gave it up when I struck gold."

We had already told the Texan about Mr. Peters. He had indeed found a goldmine, but had swapped it for Margaret's mother. I don't know the details, but there's a big story there. After his wife died, he lived quietly next door to us, with his flowers and Margaret. At odd times he got a mood on to go after gold again, but Margaret talked it out of him. She's a tactful girl.

" My grandfather found oil," the Texan said. " You'd like him, I think, Mr. Peters. He's big. He brought my father up hard, said he had to make his own way in the world. That's how Dad started his paper. I'll be taking over in a few years, when he retires. That's one reason I'm travelling now, seeing the world, getting myself ready. It's a big responsibility."

Mr. Peters nodded. He was a quiet man, but he was enjoying the conversation very much.

" His brother married an Indian girl, a chief's daughter," the Texan went on. " She was only sixteen when he met her, and she grew into a beautiful and accomplished woman."

Patsy sighed. " How romantic. An Indian princess."

" My cousin takes after her," explained the Texan, beaming at Patsy. " She's fifteen. I'm more or less looking after her these days. She's appointed me her guardian. Here's her photo, Bill."

He handed me a photograph and I put on my glasses to look at it. The Texan promptly went into roars of laughter and rolled around in his chair, for the photograph was of two weird Martian-looking people.

" She's the one on the left," he told me, when able to control himself. " I wanted to see your face, Bill. It's a gag photo. She doesn't really play football."

This cousin of his was dressed as an All-American. Her shoulders were higher than her ears. I returned the photo in silence. I was not amused.

I did not allow this, however, to interfere with the plan I had made regarding this Texan. After a suitable interval, I asked him to come riding with us the next day.

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At this, there was a kind of massed sigh from round the verandah. For we were no longer alone—the cohorts had come.

Frank Pearce, who loved Patsy, and Jim Mannering-Brown, who loved Dolly, were there as always. They had hitherto been the favoured suitors. These two blighted men had one day been walking down our street after visiting an aged relative of Frank's who lived in Berrimboola. They are the sons of squatters, with enormous lands out West, and they were happy, carefree men until they turned into our street and saw Patsy and Dolly. After that, they practically took up residence in Berrimboola.

There were about four others there as well, acknowledged suitors of Patsy and Dolly, just sitting around. Margaret's two had also turned up, Mr. Larripa's son Peter and the man Clark who taught at the school. When he first arrived, this man Clark had worried me, but as it turned out, all was well. He had hay fever, and since Margaret's house was always full of flowers he did not have much chance to shine.

Mr. Peters hated having visitors around anyway. It would have been a dull life for Margaret if we hadn't lived next door.

"What a wonderful idea!" Patsy said brightly, referring to my proposal about a ride. "Dolly, you were saying only this morning how you wished you had time for a gallop. I'll lend you Diamond, if you like."

A deathly hush followed this, for all Berrimboola knew how Dolly felt about horses. She can ride, of course, but she prefers not to. She had once tried to ride Diamond and had had to be rescued by me. And now Patsy had challenged her, paying her back for the pie.

The conversation finally got going again, for we didn't want the Texan to notice anything. After a while I went inside for my banjo, as we had decided to have music. The Texan followed me.

"A word, Bill," he said.

"As many as you like," I replied.

"I have noticed," he began in his deliberate way, "that you take great interest in my person. You've informed yourself about my family, my social standing, my prospects, my religion, and my drinking habits. Are you perhaps checking up on my eligibility as a possible member of your family?"

Rather taken aback, I nodded. He went on, having sat himself in a comfortable chair. "Why? This town is full of potential brothers-in-law. So why are you interested in me? I detect wheels within wheels, friend Bill, and I want to know what is going on."

I was embarrassed. "They're waiting for me outside, I've got to play my banjo."

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"The banjo is behind me. I'll give it to you in a minute. First, your answer. Why *me*?"

I thought it over, then decided to open up. "Well, I'll be frank with you," I began. "I'm beginning to be afraid that my sisters will never marry. They've turned down so many proposals, it's become a habit. But you're new, you see, and you're different, coming from Texas and all that. If one of them marries you, the other will get engaged like a shot because they've always wanted a double wedding. Then I'll have a bit of peace and quiet and can live my own life. I can hardly move in this house for women, the way things are."

He thought for a minute. "I see your point," he said at last, "but you'd better be careful. I don't think Frank Pearce and Jim Mannering-Brown were very pleased when you invited me to go riding tomorrow. I distinctly heard someone mutter the word, 'Traitor.'"

"I'll keep out of their way until everything's settled," I told him. "They must just take it as it comes. All's fair in love and war."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "you're right."

"There's one thing I'd better tell you," I went on. "You will, of course, come to the Ball on Saturday?"

"Nothing could keep me away."

"Well, you'd better be sure you're near the right girl at five to eleven at the Ball. As soon as you hear the drum roll, get close. I can't be fairer than that."

I was impatient to get out to the verandah now, but he wasn't. "No, Bill, no. Restrain your passion for your banjo. What is the significance of five to eleven and the drum roll? I must know; I insist on knowing. My readers must know. Elucidate."

"Well," I said, "it's quite simple. At eleven o'clock the Grand Waltz is played. It's a ladies' choice, and it's the most significant event of the year, romantically. If a girl asks you to dance and she smiles, then you're her man. If she doesn't smile, though, it doesn't count."

"And the drum roll?"

"That's to warn the men to get into position. Because if a girl wants to smile at you and you're not there, well, you're in trouble, that's all."

"All is now clear," he said, and he gave me my banjo.

The next day we went for our ride, and it was as awful as I'd expected.

Dolly had her usual trouble getting aboard her horse. (I had got Old Mick for her, he being the oldest and most placid horse

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in Mr. Larripa's collection.) Patsy just soars from ground to saddle like a bird, but Dolly has to work at it. Anyway, she got there in the end. I think myself the Texan put her there. She seemed to think some sort of miracle had taken place, and she even beamed at Patsy. We set out.

The day was just right for a ride. The countryside was looking good after the rain, and we passed the usual cows, sheep, horses, and dogs which are an integral part of the Australian scene. Patsy was here, there, and everywhere, and the Texan, too, but I stuck to Dolly out of loyalty. We just plodded along side by side and tried to look as though we were discussing important matters. Margaret spent some time with us and some with the Texan and Patsy. She is, as I have said, a tactful girl.

Then we came to the creek. It wasn't deep, and the horses just trotted through quite happily—except Old Mick. He paused in the middle to slake his thirst. He wasn't used to afternoon rides. I think he had forgotten about Dolly on his back.

He just stood there and drank, then dreamt in the sunshine a bit, and then drank some more. Time stood still, as it does at embarrassing moments. I tried to distract the Texan's attention, but Patsy laughed and laughed. There was nothing we could do but wait for Old Mick, and at last he joined us again. The rest of the ride was uneventful, and we avoided the creek on the way back.

That evening, I had dinner at the Peters' place and played my game of chess. The Texan came along to give me moral support. It was very pleasant, after the upsets at our place, just to sit there and behave like an adult. Margaret is a rather shy, restful sort of girl, not beautiful like Patsy and Dolly but pretty, with big brown eyes. Mr. Peters let the game go on for quite a long time before he beat me, out of consideration for my feelings. He is a gentleman.

So, for that matter, is the Texan. I saw him comforting Dolly in the front room earlier on, and you don't have to whisper when you play cards, which is what they were doing. They stopped whispering when they saw me.

So Dolly seemed ahead on points. I wasn't surprised, it wouldn't have been the first time she had outwitted Patsy.

But two days later, after the stockwhip exhibition, I saw the Texan kissing Patsy near the swing in our back garden.

To be correct, I saw Patsy kiss the Texan. I think she did it as an experiment, just to see what would happen.

I gave them thirty seconds, then broke it up. My sisters are older than me, but I've always felt more or less responsible for them. Any man who is a brother will know what I mean.

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"Patsy," I said, "Aunt Agnes is looking for you. In the front room."

She smiled sweetly and went off, giving my arm a sisterly pat as she went by. This was only an excuse to pinch me, hard, so that for a moment I could not control my features. I saw the Texan give me a startled look. I was about to follow Patsy and pay her back when the Texan said, "A moment, Bill."

He waited until Patsy was inside the house, then went on, "You must give me your word of honour, young William, that no whisper of what you have just seen will ever pass your lips."

"You mean, about your kissing Patsy?" I knew it was Patsy who had kissed him—in a ladylike way—and I daresay he knew that I knew, but he was a gentleman, as I have said.

"I mean just that."

"Well," I told him, "I don't know. I don't think I can promise that, Myron. It will depend on what eventuates. I can't stand aside and see any man trifle with my sisters."

He lit himself a cigar. "Let us trade," he said comfortably. "If you don't pledge your silence on what has just taken place in this garden, I, Bill, will be forced to refer to you by your baptismal name in the articles which I will write for my paper on the subject of Berrimboola and in which you will figure prominently."

My real name is Wilfrid, which is a bit of a burden to a man in an Australian country town. It had taken me years to convince people that my name was Bill, and now everybody was used to it. "I suppose you got that out of my Aunt Agnes," I said bitterly.

"A good journalist never discloses his source. All's fair in love and war, Bill; you said so yourself."

I sometimes think I talk too much.

"Very well, then," I said, "I promise."

We went into the house.

Well, the week passed. Life in Berrimboola was pretty hectic. We had an exhibition of sheepdogs at work, a horse show in which Patsy shone—she rode twice round the ring standing in her stockinged feet on Diamond's back, Diamond being unsaddled and going pretty fast. There was also a fête with sideshows. Then came Saturday, with the Show and the Ball.

The Show began in the morning and went on all day. There was something for everyone. All the best features of the week were repeated by popular request—including Patsy on Diamond—and there were school races, and a grand parade of beasts led by Mr. Heron's prize bull, and a few horseraces.

There were only three races, but we bet on them. Mr.

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Larripa sets up as a bookmaker on these occasions, which is a bit illegal, but nobody cares, not even the police. He tried to make me tell who had the Texan: Patsy or Dolly. He was taking bets on it, of course, the whole town being divided over the Texan and who would get him.

Well, the Show came to an end at last. Then, just as everybody looked about ready to drop dead from the heat and the excitement, we all went home to get ready for the Ball.

That's Australia.

By nine o'clock, we were assembled at our local hall and the Ball was under way. It was the biggest and best Ball in Berrimboola's history. Everybody was dressed up to kill. Patsy and Dolly had new dresses, also Aunt Agnes.

But—the Texan wasn't there. Half past nine came, then ten o'clock, but no Texan. Nobody knew what was going on, including me.

When half past ten came and he still wasn't there, I began to get really worried. The Ball was at full blast now, but I wasn't enjoying it. I took up a position near the door, where I could watch for him. The thing was, he had to be in position at five to eleven for the roll of drums. Otherwise, I was stuck with my sisters indefinitely.

I was luckily free at the time, for I only danced every fifth dance with Margaret Peters at these functions. Need I say that as soon as the music began, the four chairs where sat the Mason and Peters women were mobbed? It was worse than a rugger scrum. After a minute of this, one man would emerge with Patsy under his arm, then one with Dolly, the next with Margaret, the last with Aunt Agnes. Aunt Agnes, though, was no booby prize, she was one of the best dancers in the district. Age doesn't count in Berrimboola; if you're a woman you get danced off your feet anyway, and if you feel a bit faint with it all you can dodge out and fiddle with the tea-urn until you've recovered. The women thrive on it.

So I was standing near the door waiting for my turn with Margaret and watching for the Texan, when Dolly and Margaret approached me from different directions. Margaret did not look herself at all and had been out by the tea-urn.

The very fact that these two highly desirable girls were not dancing was remarkable in itself.

Dolly said quickly, under her breath, "Bill, go to the hotel and see what's happened. Maybe he's ill or something. Don't just *stand* there."

Then Margaret began to shed tears. "Oh, Dolly," she said, "he's at my place. He's playing chess with Dad."

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Had the roof fallen in, I couldn't have been more startled. "But Myron doesn't play chess."

"Yes, he does, he's won prizes. He's playing Dad for me. I didn't know, he only asked if he could this afternoon. Oh Dolly, *suppose he doesn't win.*"

Dolly didn't even blink. She just beamed and kissed Margaret. "Oh, how wonderful! Of course he'll win. I knew he was in love with you, I could tell. I was afraid he wouldn't have the nerve to ask your father."

And then, while we were all staring at one another, the Texan arrived. He was smiling so wide, we saw the smile before we saw the Texan behind it.

"I won," he said, "I won, everybody."

And then the drum rolled . . .

There was no question about who the Texan was to dance with. Margaret was smiling at him like a rainbow, and he stood there beaming back. Dolly was gone to tell Patsy the news. Then, when the Grand Waltz began, there they all were, Patsy with Frank Pearce, Dolly with Jim Mannering-Brown. Aunt Agnes was dancing with Mr. Heron, which was a relief, for none of us really liked Mr. Larripa, for all that he was obliging about our horses.

Apparently Dolly had known all the time about Margaret and the Texan. Nothing gets past that girl. She was always leaving them together, it turned out, to give him a chance. She was going to marry Jim, she told me afterwards, she'd meant to all along, and Patsy would wed Frank, and maybe they will, but you never can tell anything with those girls. They certainly fooled Berrimboola over Myron Guthrie of Texas.

I was pretty upset at first about the Texan falling in love with Margaret, but I got over it. Actually, I now plan to marry his cousin, for I have seen another photograph and she is beautiful. First, though, I have to beat the Texan at chess, he has made it a rule; he thinks it a wonderful idea.

Even before I saw this photograph, however, I had forgiven him. The way he and Margaret danced together in our hall, you could tell they were made for each other. The funny thing was, Margaret was all of a sudden beautiful, more beautiful even than Patsy. I suppose that's what love is, the real thing.

I can hardly wait to grow up.

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CONVERSATIONAL TRAPS?

Traveller: one who returns with brag and baggage.

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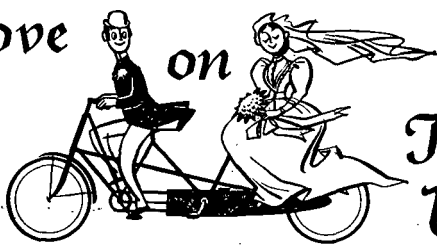
Love on Two Wheels



But you'd look sweet upon the seat
Of a bicycle made for two . . .

'Twixt those unmann'd
By automobile ease
And he-man pedallers
With hirsute knees
The modern centaur
Steers a middle course,
Half man, half driver—
Helped by half a horse.

MARK BEVAN, *Auto Cyclist*

Dutch Treat

" You'll have to share my bicycle as far as the fairground," he said.

" Thank you, no, I've seen how you ride! "

" But you're in Holland. And there's no other way of getting you there on time. Now I'm sorry I've no carrier, but you sit facing me on the handlebars—"

" Not me."

" You can put your hands on my shoulders and shut your eyes . . ."

" Too bad. In no circumstances—"

Laughing, he swooped and picked her up—Louise was tall but light—put her on the handlebars and rode off with her triumphantly. " You see, it is quite easy to balance this way. If I need to ring the bell, I will call ' *Wagele!* ' That means, ' wriggle,' " he told her . . .

By the time they struck into the magnificent sixteenth-century Grootplatz,

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Louise had gathered enough courage to let go of van Epp with one hand, and wave it affably at the other correspondents; the bicycle passed close to their table. Einarsen's face as he recognised her was a pleasure to see . . . The skirt of her neat black suit was well up above her knees and wisps of her long hair, generally worn sleek and coiled, was blown forward in a mane over her face. Her movement made the bell cluck faintly . . .

"I have not said, 'Wagele!'" van Epp protested.

E. Arnot Robertson, *Justice of the Heart*

I Did But See Her Passing By

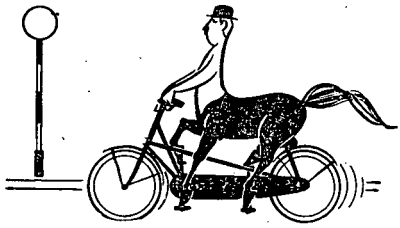
And Cupid let his Arrows fly
As one chill morning in July
Brooks Todlipp saw her cycling by.

Shamus Frazer, *Professor Todlipp's Love-Child*

Co-op, My Pretty

When neither bus nor carrier-cart were running, Mother walked the four miles to the shops, trudging back home with her baskets of groceries and scattering packets of tea in the mud. When she tired of this, she'd borrow Dorothy's bicycle, though she never quite mastered the machine. Happy enough when the thing was in motion, it was stopping and starting that puzzled her. She had to be launched on her way by running parties of villagers; and to stop she rode into a hedge. With the Stroud Co-op Stores, where she was a registered customer, she had come to a special arrangement. This depended for its success upon a quick ear and timing, and was a beautiful operation to watch. As she coasted downhill towards the shop's main entrance she would let out one of her screams; an assistant, specially briefed, would tear through the shop, out the side door, and catch her in his arms. He had to be both young and nimble, for if he missed her she piled up by the police-station.

Laurie Lee, *Cider with Rosie*



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Romeo and Juliet

Now and then they preferred to remain on their bicycles, lock their handlebars and cycle for miles linked together in a sort of dreamy ecstasy, their arms round each other's waists . . .

G. B. STERN, *Little Red Horses*

Maid of Astolat

Her window looks upon the lane.
From it, anonymous and shy,
Twice daily she can see him plain,
Wheeling heroic by.
She droops her cheek against the pane
And gives a little sigh.

Above him maples at their bloom
Shake April pollen down like stars
While he goes whistling past her room
Toward unimagined wars,
A tennis visor for his plume,
Scornful of handlebars.

PHYLLIS MCGINLEY, *Launcelot with Bicycle*

Young Lochinvar

Maisie liked best to lead, but Malcolm was the best leader. He had an offhand, slick virtuosity on the wheel which none of us could approach; his balancing feats would not have shamed a music-hall trick cyclist . . . Then he would place a cushion for Jess on the bar of his bicycle and invite her to mount, which she did demurely, side-saddle. Gruffly bidding her to lean against him, he would wobble away with her for secluded rides in the lime alleys.

In these odorous, subaqueously-lit tunnels he would share his sweets with her; and once suddenly kissed her cheek.

ROSAMOND LEHMANN, *The Ballad and the Source*

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HUGH'S THERE?

I stood, staring at the doorknob, and feeling cold in the cosy room

BY JAMES WALKER

THE TROUBLE with Hugh was his ghosts. All his friends agreed that his habit of dragging in the supernatural by the cleft of its hoof could be acutely embarrassing, to say nothing of his seeing ghosts at dinner-party tables, like Macbeth. Hugh could feel a ghost a mile away, as some people can feel an east wind coming up, and he had an uncanny knack of making other people think they felt it, too.

Most people were convinced that Hugh had in fact seen a good many ghosts in a good many places, some of them very odd. Like the ghost of the Franciscan monk that walked solemnly in through one closed door of the tube-train running between Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus one night, stopped in astonishment at finding itself there, and then shot out through the other closed door, in a great hurry and very frightened. On another occasion, in a particular corner of a cottage kitchen which always gave its owner what she called "the wickie-willies," Hugh saw a seventeenth-century crone sitting on the floor viciously cleaning a man's riding-boots with spit and a filthy rag.

"The man was standing *in* the boots," said Hugh, "but I didn't actually *see* him. He stopped at the knees. I expect there wasn't quite enough ecto-stuff to go round, or something, and the old girl just got a bit upstage and bagged the lot."

Hugh often spoke in this jocular manner about his ghosts, cunningly giving the impression that you didn't have to believe in them if you didn't want to. Personally, I didn't.

Not until the evening he came to dine with us, without other company, in our new flat, and my wife had unexpectedly to go out for a while after dinner, leaving us alone together. It is an odd flat in an old converted mews, and it has a plethora of communicating doors. The entrance stairs from the garage lead up to the passage, which bends into a right angle and ends at the sitting-room door. The spare room opens off the passage at the top of the stairs, and communicates with the bedroom, which communicates with the sitting-room, and so, through the other L-arm of the

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passage, back again with the stairs. It is a wonderful layout for dodging people you don't want to see: as soon as they come up the stairs and down the passage to the sitting-room, you can nip from the sitting-room into the bedroom, go through the other door into the spare room, out through the spare-room door into the passage they have just turned out of, and down the stairs, without having been seen. And your wife, showing them into the empty sitting-room, can say quite truthfully that they've just missed you going out. The whole thing is just right for a Lupino Lane farce. Or, come to think of it, for one of Hugh's ridiculous ghosts.

I suppose I asked for it, really. "Well, Hugh old man," I said breezily, "do you feel any ghosts in *this* flat?"

Hugh smiled.

"It's very friendly," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

"That's nice to hear," I said. "Of course, we have tried hard to make it so—the open fire, you know, and the bright whatnots, and all that. Gives the place a homely, cheerful air, I suppose."

Hugh looked a little hurt.

"I didn't mean the flat," he said. "I meant the ghost."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. You mean, there *is* a ghost here, but it's a friendly one."

"Very," said Hugh. "You needn't be afraid of him."

"Oh, it's a *him*, is it?" I tried to sound serious.

"Yes," said Hugh. He was staring wistfully at the closed bedroom door behind me. "He's in there at the moment," he said. "Lying down. He's not feeling very well."

"Oh, bad luck. I *am* sorry."

I suppose I should have wanted to laugh, and have told Hugh to come off it. But somehow, you know, I didn't. We seemed to be talking about a real person and a real situation, and I felt peculiar. Not scared, exactly, but worried, uncomfortable—as you do when the children go all of a sudden dead quiet in the other room, and you wonder for an awful instant whether they've knocked each other unconscious.

I got up now under something of the same sort of compulsion, and went to the bedroom door. But I couldn't bring myself to open it. I just stood there staring at my hand on the knob of the door, and feeling cold in the warm, cosy room.

I turned round to Hugh, who was sitting in the armchair facing the bedroom door. He was smiling to himself.

"Really," I began, trying to laugh it off, "it's bloody silly, but do you know—"

"It's all right," he said, getting up from the chair. "I'll exorcise it for you. Excuse me."

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And he went past me, opened the bedroom door, switched on the light, went in, and shut the door behind him, leaving me staring at the chair he had just left.

I went to the fireplace and lit myself a cigarette, and I heard Hugh moving about in the bedroom, going through into the spare room. Then I heard him coming back the other way, down the passage, and the passage door to the sitting-room opened and Hugh came in, looking very pale and smiling a most extraordinarily cunning smile. He crossed to the armchair and sat down in complete silence, gazing at the closed bedroom door and continuing to smile.

I was just about to speak to him when I heard the bedroom doorknob turning behind me, and I swung round in surprise and fear. The bedroom door opened and Hugh came out of the bedroom—*Hugh*, who, a split second before, was sitting in the armchair now behind me. I felt my mouth drop open as I swung round again to look at the chair. It was empty. The cigarette dropped from my fingers and fell on to the carpet.

"Look out!" said Hugh, coming forward from the bedroom door and picking up the cigarette. "And sit down. It's quite all right. I've had a friendly little chat with him, and he's gone away. Nice chap, but a little touchy. I say, old man, do sit down. You look as though you'd seen a gho— I mean, you look quite pale. Is anything the matter?" © James Walker 1960

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SALAD DISTRESSING

I'll just take my greenery
As scenery.
I often speak harshly
Of parshley.
I won't make a fetish
Of lettish.
I'm disgustard with mustard
Esparshly.
Oh, hickory-chickory, into the discard!
Cabbage and watercress, spinach and Swiss chard:
These I bequeath to the Order Rodentia,
And emphasise loudly, beyond peradventia,
The gist of this trivia
I givia:
Food rife with chlorophyll
Is orophyl!

PENNY PENNINGTON

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The DAY of the TORTOISE

THURSDAY was always custard day: extra milk for the cats, the tortoise, and the custard.

Fred Tomlinson, fifty-seven, wearing carpet slippers of a faded red plum colour that sprouted untidy grey sprigs of cottonwool here and there at the toes, came down the shabby Victorian staircase at half past six in the morning carrying half a stump of candle in a pink china holder, his collar and tie, yesterday's newspaper, and the remains of a pork pie he had been too tired to finish the previous evening and had taken to bed with him in case he woke hungry in the night.

The tie, of the kind that is ready-made and fixes to the collar with elastic, was exactly the colour of his tired-looking hair and moustache: a shade of uneven reddish brown, as if both had

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FIRST PUBLICATION!
BRILLIANT NEW SHORT COMPLETE NOVEL

By

H. E. BATES

been dressed with stale boot polish. Two cardigans, one a bleached sage green that buttoned over the other, a red one, like an ancient envelope that had been stuck and restuck over and over again but never in quite the same place twice, hung down a foot or two over the tops of his creaseless denim trousers.

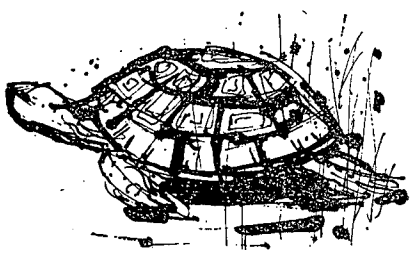
His face, with the eyes floating in it like a pair of damp pale blue lozenges, had the slightly concentrated yet absent air of an unhurried dog trying to remember, though not very hard or successfully, where it had hidden a favourite bone the day before yesterday.

In the kitchen two budgerigars, one green, the other blue, were still quiet in the circular cage covered over with a yellow duster by the window. Three cats, one black, two marmalade, were still half asleep under the table, the two marmalades together in a wicker basket.

Fred took the duster off the cage, and one of the budgerigars, Joey, the blue one, said, "Good morning." The other, Mr. Sylvester, the green one, said, "I trust I see you well, sir?" and Fred said, "Good morning. Yes, very well, thank you. And you?"

"Everything in the garden's lovely," Mr. Sylvester said.

Mr. Sylvester was an apter and quicker pupil altogether than



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Joey, who was a trifle lethargic, and could have been taught to say anything if only Fred had had the time. Unfortunately his three elder sisters, whom he called the girls, took up most of it. Sometimes in fact he was so busy that he neglected to shave for a day; often his shirts needed changing and he neglected these too.

Presently he unlocked the kitchen door and put the cats out. The morning had a warm summery air of promise about it and across the lawn a tortoise with several yards of string tied to one of its legs was crawling slowly in the sun.

"Good morning, William," Fred said, and it seemed almost as if the tortoise slightly turned its head in answer.

In the middle of the lawn a catalpa tree stood already in full sun, but beyond it the shadow of two gigantic horsechestnuts, almost as tall as the three-storeyed Victorian house itself, lay across a strip of orchard at the far end of the long garden, putting a group of stables entirely in shadow.

Back in the kitchen, Fred had several pieces of small washing, handkerchiefs, teatowels, dusters, and so on, soaking in the sink. He rinsed them out, hung them over the stove to dry, and then went back to the sink to wash out six milk bottles, a saucepan, and a dog's dinner-plate. A cooker of overnight porridge stood on the stove.

Upstairs, his three sisters, Aggie, Ella, and Flossie were still asleep. Flossie, the youngest, was dumpy, with bleached thistle-down hair, cheeks always powdered a heavy toothpaste pink, and large vain blue eyes. She was never awake before eleven, when Fred took up her breakfast of coffee and toast to her room on the first floor.

Some time before this he took up early morning tea and petit beurre biscuits to her black miniature poodle, which slept in a basket just inside the bedroom door; and later, when Flossie had gone out to have late coffee or lunch or to play bridge with friends, he took the poodle portions of best fillet steak, underdone.

Ella, the middle one, was fair too, but in a very different way. Her hair had the appearance of a forkful of hay carelessly dumped down on the top of her head and never combed. The few freckles on her face might have been old grass seeds. Her room was on the second floor and in it she had made a little altar by the fireplace. This consisted of a mahogany sofa table covered with a yellow silk runner, two brass candlesticks, a crucifix, and two Chinese dishes of potpourri. In front of it stood a black-and-red needlework footstool on which Ella kneeled for long periods of the day, praying for the souls of all and sundry, but especially animals and birds.

Far away at the top of the house Aggie lived in supreme isolation, strictly apart, in self-chosen purdah, never coming down. Fred had never seen his eldest sister in entirety for several years, though he was familiar with her head and shoulders. These appeared several times a day at her bedroom window, from which she hauled up groceries, letters, milk, books, writing paper, and anything else she wanted in a large wicker basket at the end of a pulley.

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For the greater part of the day Aggie sat writing messages. She fancied herself as a chosen emissary between this world and the next, what she called the Other Side. She was tall and thin, with a yellowish knuckled face and pondering grey eyes with large smoky stains underneath them. She lived mostly on cocoa and fried fish, which Fred bought at the fish-and-chip shop at the end of the road and then warmed up in the kitchen and periodically sent up to her with bread and butter, in the wicker basket.

The people she most liked to send messages to were the Queen, various Presidents of the United States, both living and dead, and Gandhi. It didn't matter that Gandhi or even some of the Presidents were dead. In some ways it was better. It meant that Aggie was in closer contact with the Other Side.

Messages of importance, to people of great influence scattered over the world, were always posted, sometimes registered. The brief local ones were sent by jackdaw. Fred had found the jackdaw, now called Francis, sitting on the stable steps one morning, a tame tenacious visitor who refused to fly away. When Aggie heard of it she knew that Francis was a Divine Instrument placed in her hands as part of the will, the great pattern, for a peaceful, better world.

All day, now, the jackdaw flew over streets, roofs, and gardens with some cautionary message or other ringed to its leg. Strangers to the town found themselves picking it up, unfolding the message, and reading short injunctions of startling innocence, such as,

Do You Want to Be a Murderer?
Pray for Peace!

or *Look Down! Is there blood on your hands?*

Far downstairs, in the kitchen, in the garden, in the stables, in the big Victorian rooms that had long since frightened away all servants, Fred slaved. Fred, his sisters said, liked to be busy. It was good for him. The long, full days kept him out of mischief. Fred, with his tired brown moustache and floating lozenge eyes always so pensive, looked utterly incapable of mischief of any sort, and filled his day to the full with cats, tortoise, budgerigars, cooking, washing up, dusting, shopping, digging, mowing the lawn, and essential tasks like making custard.

Was there an errand to be run? Fred would run it. Aggie had a registered letter for Gandhi. Fred would post it. The milkman would have delivered milk to the house every morning, but the three sisters thought on the contrary that Fred should fetch it from the dairy. The walk was good for Fred. He liked it. It didn't hurt him at all.

It was only in the late evenings that Fred, with the last of the teacloths put in soak, the budgerigars put to bed, the stove banked up, and the porridge started, found himself with time enough to go up to the stable, smoke a pipe, even have a glass of beer and read the daily paper.

The nearest Fred ever came to mischief was the evening glass of beer. No horses had lived in the stable for a long time and now,

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in the loft upstairs, Fred had devised for himself, in his own den, a few degrees of comfort that the house never gave. He could sit in an old Windsor chair or lie at full length on a faded Victorian sofa in his shirtsleeves, his carpet slippers on, in welcome peace, puffing and sipping.

Once a week the beer delivery came in secret by the backgarden gate, where the two huge horsechestnuts spanned with an arch of cool black shade the roof of the stables. In spring the air was full of the scent of chestnut blossom and in late autumn the chestnuts split from their husks and drummed down on the roof with a monotonous but friendly sound.

Tired but happy, long fixed in the habit of reading alone under the single electric light bulb, Fred wished for nothing else. It didn't occur to him, in fact, that there was anything else to wish for.

On his way to the dairy, Fred saw the first of Aggie's messages, carried by the jackdaw, going out over the calm, sunny town. It was going to be warm again, he thought, and already he had taken off one of his cardigans. In a wire bottle-carrier he was carrying six empty milk bottles, one more than on any other day than Thursday.

He had never troubled to ask himself why Thursday was always custard day or why the only thing he had in common with his sisters, or they with each other, was a liking for custard. He might have supposed it was something left over from childhood, another old fixed habit they couldn't get out of.

The dairy was clean and cool-looking, with a front of emerald-and-yellow tiles made to form a picture of summery meadowland and a herd of grazing cows. A faint smell of butter, with a thicker, half-sour odour of milk, came through the open door.

"Good morning, Shirley. Going to be warm again. Wouldn't you think so?"

The girl behind the marble counter, reddish-haired, with grey-green eyes and a delicate pointed chin, stared back at Fred in a slightly estranged way, half smiling, without a word.

"Gracious me, I thought you were Shirley. Where's Shirley today?"

"Scalded herself with a kettle last night," the girl said, laughing as if it were a big joke. "All down one arm and part of one leg. She's in hospital. She's rather bad, they say."

Fred said he couldn't believe it. It didn't seem right. Shirley had served him with milk for years.

"Well, there it is," the girl said. "You'll have to put up with me for the next six weeks or so."

Suddenly she laughed again and Fred couldn't help thinking it was a remarkable, brilliant sound. It was more like a spontaneous piece of birdsong than a laugh. It was gay, buoyantly sharp, and yet tender.

Above all it was very infectious and for no reason at all Fred started laughing too, only coming to his senses some moments

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later to say, " I don't know why we should stand here laughing. It isn't exactly a laughing matter."

" Well, weeping wouldn't do much good either, would it? "

Fred supposed there was some truth in that, but before he could say a word she went on, " I'm always laughing a lot anyway. I see the funny side of things. Do you? Do you laugh a lot? "

Fred started to confess that he didn't think he did, not all that much, and then broke off in unexpected confusion, held by the girl's candid, commandingly bright eyes.

" It only takes a little thing to set me off," she said. She started taking empty milk bottles from the basket Fred had put on the counter. " How many do you have? Six? "

" Six on Thursdays."

" Only on Thursdays? "

Solemnly Fred explained that it was because they always made custard on Thursdays and once again she started laughing. She thought that was killing, she said. " Do you live near? " she said. " You must do, or you wouldn't bring half a dozen bottles in."

Well, it wasn't all that near, Fred said. He lived with his sisters right at the end of the avenue.

" I live with my sister too. Why don't you have the milk delivered? "

Fred said he liked the walk. It was good for him.

" Who says so? "

Fred didn't know who said so. He couldn't recall anybody ever having said so. It was just assumed.

" You're a one, you are." She let out another brilliant laugh that seemed to slap at the shining walls of the dairy. " Do you fetch it every morning? "

" Every morning."

" Do you want to pay or shall I book it? "

" Book it, please," he said. " Mr. Fred Tomlinson. I pay on the first of every month."

By this time she had put all six full bottles into the basket, and Fred was just about to pick them up and depart when she smiled and asked him if there was anything else he wanted?

There was nothing else at all that Fred wanted. He got all the groceries, butter, bacon, eggs, and such things on Saturday mornings, but suddenly he found himself saying, " Yes, there is. Butter, I think. And a few eggs."

" How much? How many eggs? "

Fred, not conscious of thinking, said he'd take two pounds of butter and a dozen eggs. All the time, as she packed eggs and butter into paper bags, he was watching her. She was so different from Shirley, who was dumpy, shiny, and double-chinned. The deep reddish hair was more than startling. The brilliant grey-green eyes never let him rest.

" This is rather a lot to carry, isn't it? " she said, after Fred had said he'd take a pound of bacon too. " You'll never manage it, will you, with the milk too? "

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Oh yes, he'd manage, Fred said. He was used to carrying things.

" Suppose I pop them all into a cardboard box? You'll manage easier then. Don't want to have scrambled eggs and bacon all down your shirt front, do you? "

This was the signal for another brilliant laugh, which pealed about the empty dairy like a bell, and again Fred found himself laughing too.

" It's no joke though," she said. " Do you really want all this now? Which end of the avenue do you live? Top end? "

Fred nodded, and she said, " I got to come home that way at lunch-time. I could drop them in. Glad to."

" Oh no, no," Fred said. The idea of someone doing something for him was too ridiculous for anything. Quite impossible. " Oh no, no."

" What's the name of the house? "

" Ullswater."

" I know it. The big red-brick one."

" Yes, but really—"

" No trouble at all. I've got to come past it anyway."

" It's really very kind of you. Really awfully kind, but—"

" I'm the kind sort," she said. Another laugh, on even higher scales than the rest, seemed actually to lift her hair from her face as she threw back her head and parted her red lips widely. " Kind-hearted Kitty my mother used to call me."

" Will you really bring the eggs and things up? "

" Just after twelve," she said. " I'll be there."

Fred, picking up the milk bottles, smiled and thanked her.

" Come round to the kitchen door," he said. " I'll be able to hear you better."

All the way back to the house, walking more slowly than usual in the windless sunny morning, under the street limes, he kept asking himself how old she could possibly be. It baffled him completely. Her face had sometimes the naïve candour of the very young. A moment later it seemed altogether older; the penetrative grey-green eyes were quite mature. A restless innocence seemed to be the cause of that almost continuous laughter of hers; yet he couldn't be sure. He felt it seemed to be hiding something too.

He spent part of the morning gathering gooseberries; he was going to make jam in the afternoon. But at a quarter to eleven Flossie, sixty last birthday, was awake and at the window of her bedroom, in an impossibly fluffy bright blue dressing-jacket, calling to him that she only wanted a cup of coffee and a biscuit and would he bring it up?

Dutifully Fred abandoned gooseberries, made the coffee, and took it up to Flossie's room. Flossie was busy at the elaborations of making up. Her dressing-table was like a pink crinoline, fussy with lace and ribbons, crowned all over with packs of skinfood, nail polish, vanishing cream, lipstick, mascara, eau-de-cologne, and several expensive perfumes.

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As he entered the room with the coffee, she seemed to be absorbed, before her mirror, in the exacting business of putting on eye-shadow in an improbable shade of turquoise, but she was alert enough to give him the quickest of glances and say, "You're very forgetful this morning, aren't you, Fred?"

"Forgetful?"

"You didn't bring the biscuit I asked for."

Without a word, Fred went downstairs to get the biscuit. Back again, he found her putting on her eyelashes, a pair of bright golden ones. The skin of her face was a pink crust, and he said, "Will you be back for lunch today?"

"I might and I might not," she said. "It all depends. I'm going to have coffee with some of the girls at half past eleven and you know how it is. We get talking and then it's lunch-time and before you know it—"

"Shall I keep something hot?"

"Well, you might. What is there?"

"Steak-and-kidney pie," Fred said, "and I'm going to get some new potatoes and broad beans."

"I don't think so," she said. "It's too hot. If I get back you can do me an egg or something before I have my lie-down."

In the garden Fred finished picking gooseberries and then gathered broad beans and thought again of the girl in the dairy and what made her laugh so much and how old she was. The sun was hot on his back in the bean-rows and presently he took the basket of beans and sat on a seat under the thick shade of the catalpa tree, with a colander on his knees, and started to shell them. Next to the stables the catalpa tree was his favourite spot in the garden. It was a haven; there was something wonderfully embalming and friendly about the umbrella of huge pale green leaves.

He was halfway through the beans, still thinking in his baffling groping way about the girl, when he saw Aggie's basket descending on its pulley down the side of the house. It meant she wanted something.

Going over to the basket, he found in it six letters, a bundle of dirty laundry, a paper bag of yesterday's fish scraps for the cats, and a note which read: *Out of cocoa. Not fish today. Do Rawlinsons have chicken breasts? I'd like some. Stamps, ink, envelopes, string, sealing-wax, barley water. And you didn't send the post up. Was there none? And the papers.*

Fred realised he had utterly forgotten post and papers, just as he had forgotten Flossie's biscuit. Bemused, he put Aggie's note in his pocket and promptly forgot that too.

After seven or eight letters and the morning papers had gone sailing up the houseside in the basket he went back to the catalpa tree to finish the beans. The tortoise was crawling aimlessly about the lawn in the sun. Every now and then, just as life seemed to be opening out for it, it reached the limit of its string and halted.

In the same way Fred's thoughts kept straying this way and that, never getting anywhere. The string of long-fixed

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circumstances kept him constantly in check. Every now and then a fresh development of thought about the girl in the dairy seemed about to take him away into new territory, but the habitual call of beans, gooseberry jam, lunch, washing, Aggie's shopping list, and the potatoes he still hadn't scraped kept pulling him back again. Good God, he suddenly thought, I wonder if Ella wants breakfast?

Ella, irregular of breakfast habits, could ring her bedroom bell if she wanted him. He hadn't heard a thing all morning and now he rushed into the house, went upstairs, knocked on her bedroom door, and said, "Ella, is there anything you want? Ella, you haven't rung, have you?"

Nothing but complete silence, not so much hushed and prayerful as condemnatory, greeted him on the darkened landing at the head of the second flight of stairs.

"Ella, will you have breakfast? Is there anything you want?"

"Six times I rang and you never once answered."

"I'm sorry. I was in the garden—"

"You just abandon me when you think you will."

"Yes, but I was in the garden—"

"You wouldn't do it to Aggie, or to Flossie, but you do it to me."

"Yes, but—"

"I don't want anything, thank you. Go away."

"You haven't had any more trouble with mice, have you?" Fred said. Ella was always complaining of mice, though her principles forbade her to trap them. There was no reply.

Downstairs, less disconsolate than still bemused, Fred put some of the gooseberries in a saucepan to stew. He supposed Ella would eventually come round when she remembered it was custard day. She was very fond of gooseberries and custard.

There were still potatoes to scrape and presently he took a saucepanful over to the shade of the catalpa tree. William had disappeared now in the direction of a clump of rhododendrons, where he could do no harm, but now and then the string gave a brief jerk on the grass, like a long dreamy worm.

"Hullo there. I've been ringing at the backdoor for hours."

The pealing laugh of the red-haired girl brought Fred with energetic apology to his feet. "I'm most awfully—"

"I put the eggs and things in the kitchen," she said. "Your gooseberries were boiling over, so I took them off the gas. Heavens, it's hot today." She gave a surprised glance at the colander of half-scraped potatoes, but offered no comment either on that or on the fact that Fred was wearing an apron.

"Do sit down," Fred said. "Stay a minute, won't you?"

Fred, fussing with his apron in an indecisive way, wondering whether to take it off or not, said it was awfully, awfully good of her to come and perhaps he could get her something cool to drink? Orange or something? Lemonade?"

The girl, sitting down on the seat, seemed to give a sigh, part

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dubious, as it seemed, part reflective, pressing her tongue against her upper teeth before again laughing gaily.

" Haven't got a drop of gin, I suppose, have you? "

The remote possibility of finding gin in the house disturbed Fred less than the thought that presently either Aggie or Ella, or both of them, might hear that ringing laugh. Ella, always on the suspicious side, might even come into the garden to see about it. And he was sharply aware of not wanting them to hear. He didn't want a soul to come and see.

" I'll pop into the house and see what there is," he said. " What will you have if I can't find gin? "

" Oh, a drop of whisky."

Fred drank neither gin nor whisky, but a half-bottle of gin, used once or twice by Flossie as an improbable cure for heartburn, stood on a shelf in the old butler's pantry.

Going back to the catalpa tree with gin, glasses, and a bottle of orange squash, he found to his surprise that the girl had disappeared. A moment later her voice called from the inner shadows of the rhododendron shrubbery, " I thought I'd see what was on the end of the string. It keeps moving but I can't find a thing."

" It's William," he said. " Our tortoise."

Another splendid laugh shook the calm air of the garden and she came into sight brushing a dry leaf or two from her hair with her hands. Once again she said how hot she thought it was, and Fred said, " I found the gin. Wouldn't you come and have it up in the stables? It'll be cooler. I've got a sort of den up there."

" Lovely," she said.

Above the stables, when he had opened a window wide on the north side, he set gin, glasses, and orange squash on an old round mahogany table in front of the sofa.

" Nice in here," the girl said. " You don't sleep in here, do you? "

No, Fred told her, it was just his den. A place to be quiet in.

" You could do, though," she said, " couldn't you? "

Fred had never really thought of it and said, " Would you care to help yourself to gin? I'm not sure how you like it."

" Thanks," she said. " Are you having some? "

Fred, who rarely if ever took a drop of anything at midday, said he thought he'd have a beer and came back from finding a bottle to see the girl pouring herself a three-quarter's glass of spirit, topping it up with a bare half inch of orange. It seemed, he thought, about a treble measure.

" Well, cheers," she said. " Thanks. Just what I wanted."

She drank eagerly and presently Fred sat down on an old Windsor chair and sipped his beer. As he occupied the chair she swung her legs up on the sofa, stretching them out.

" Nice to relax a minute. Been on my feet since eight," she said. " Sisters older than you? "

" Oh yes. Quite a bit older."

After drinking again she ran her tongue over her lips. The

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fresh wetness made them shine as scarlet as rose-hips and she said, looking at him closely, " I've got an idea you're the maid-of-all work round here. Saw you scraping potatoes."

" Oh, I've done it for years. The girls rely on me."

" The girls, eh? " She drank again; the level of the gin was dropping fast. " Lucky them. I wish I had someone to rely on."

" What about your sister? "

" Oh, her! She's a lemon."

Fred sipped beer, not speaking. The lightest of breezes, stirring from the heavy shade of the big chestnut tree, drifted in, disturbing the front of her hair. For some reason it now seemed much paler in colour in the shadow of the stable loft. It was the colour you sometimes saw in the manes of certain young horses, but infinitely softer.

" Proper damn meanie," the girl said. " In fact she's going to turn me out. She threatened me at breakfast. We fight like cats and dogs."

She raised her glass, drank again, and assured Fred that that was why she needed this.

" But that's hard," Fred said. " She can't just do that, can she? "

" Oh, can't she? You don't know Rita. Well, suppose she's got reason, though. I've been out of a job six weeks and haven't been able to give her a penny."

The gin had diminished to a mere orange blob, the size of a sixpence, in the bottom of the glass. She eyed it with a certain ironic regret and then looked at him with the full, candid, grey-green eyes that constantly disturbed him so much.

" Mind if I have a drop more? Don't, do you? "

" Oh, please," Fred said. " Please."

Watching her pour another treble measure, he was suddenly overwhelmingly consumed by a mental picture of her wandering across infinite numbers of dusky streets, dragging a suitcase. It was the sort of thing he found it impossible to tolerate dispassionately; you couldn't do that to people.

" Ah well, something'll turn up," she said, and laughed again. " It'd better, though, quick."

A sudden impulse made Fred get up, go and stand by the window and look out across the lawn. William was crawling out of the catalpa shade into a shining bright sea of sunlight. The saucepan of potatoes stood where he had left it on the grass. In the distance Aggie's basket was descending on its pulley with a rapidity that might have been ominous and for once in his life he ignored it completely.

Behind him the girl laughed again and it might have been gin that gave her voice an almost exuberant crackle.

" Well, suppose I'd better go. Got to hear the worst."

She was about to swing her legs to the floor when Fred remembered, as in an astonished dream, that he hadn't made any custard. The morning ought to have been in ruins; but he ignored that too.

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" For a girl who's about to be turned out of house and home," he said, " I must say you take it most cheerfully."

She swung her legs back to the sofa, knees exposed.

" Well, it's like I said. No use crying about it, is there? Besides that's me. That's how I am. I like being cheerful. Can't help it. I like laughing."

Fred sat sipping beer again, looking solemn.

A certain sadness had begun to spread through Fred's mind and he found no way, in words at any rate, of expressing it. He could only feel once again like the tortoise. His thoughts kept straying out, never getting anywhere.

" Well, anyway," he said at last, " you've got the job."

" That's a fact," she said, laughing again. " I can always sleep in the warehouse. With the bacon."

Years of service to Aggie, Ella, and Flossie had given Fred a quality of uncomplaining resource in crises. If a thing had to be done, it had to be done.

" I suppose you'll know by this evening," he said.

" You bet. Unless there's been a miracle. And I don't believe in them."

" No? " Fred said. " I rather do. In a way."

She drained the last of the gin and got up off the sofa. He was a funny fellow, she told him. She liked his little place up here. She supposed he'd never thought of having a gramophone and a few records? That would make it gay.

" I hope you don't mind my asking," Fred said, " but I'd like to know how things go. I always go down to the post every evening about six and I just wondered—"

" All right," she said. " Meet me out. We'll have a drink somewhere."

He promised to do that, and for some time after she had slipped out of the backgarden gate, under the chestnut trees, he sat at the table, staring at his beer. His tortoise-like thoughts wandered in and out of shadow. The existence of Aggie, Ella, and Flossie was shut away from him, in a haze.

Even a peremptory screech of distress from a second floor window, that of Ella shedding the needs of prayer for those of hunger, or the frantic jogging of Aggie's basket by the housewall, hardly woke him. How old was that girl? What in the world made her laugh so much? He wandered across the lawn under the blistering midday sunlight, blue lozenge-like eyes apparently more absent, more than ever floating. There was something hidden behind it all.

By a quarter to six he had made gooseberry jam, set the custard to cool, cut egg-and-cress sandwiches for Flossie, who had woken for late tea after a long lie-down following a fresh salmon and cucumber lunch with some of the girls at the Ladies Liberal Club. He had cooked more potatoes, made a salad of them with mayonnaise, and popped round to the fish shop to buy four pieces of fish for Aggie, who had changed her mind after all and didn't want the

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chicken breasts. Aggie also liked sliced bananas with her salad. It went so well with fish and he made it separately.

Just as he was about to depart with Aggie's letters, altogether nine of them, Ella woke to desperate life and called that she had run out of Aspirins and the pills she had to take for blood pressure. He said he would call for them at the chemist's and was already outside the kitchen door with the letters when a rousing tap on the drawing-room window checked him in his stride.

It was Flossie, pink, fresh, and all bandbox after rest, fussy in a dress of lavender silk, calling him pettishly to heel. Whatever was the matter with him today? There was no salt in the sandwiches.

Flossie having been appeased with salt and the evening paper, which had just dropped through the letterbox, he walked slowly down the avenue with the letters. The evening was still very warm and he had long since discarded his cardigans and was wearing a rather battered coat of biscuit-cream alpaca at least twelve years old.

He idly turned over the letters as he walked and discovered that Aggie, in a field day, had written to Gandhi, President Roosevelt, the Prime Minister, Dr. Banda, the Dean of St. Paul's, Sherpa Tensing, Mr. Chou En-lai, the Governor of Dartmoor Prison, and William Cowper. The fact that three of them were dead was of no consequence at all. Cowper's hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*, was not only one she often sang in her industrious seclusion upstairs; it also formed a constant source of messages to wrap round the feet of the speeding Francis. Fred now remembered that he hadn't seen Francis all afternoon but he had no doubt as to the bird's busyness.

Less in absentmindedness than in growing confusion, he put the letters in his pocket, and as with salt, custard, and a number of other things during the course of the day, promptly forgot them. The realisation of what exactly he was doing walking down to the dairy had been slow in coming to him. Now his mind started grasping at the notion that he was, in fact, actually keeping a date with a girl.

"Hullo. There you are. I got off a bit early."

As if by another miracle, the girl seemed suddenly conjured before him, startling and fresh as ever, under the lengthening shadows of the street limes. Instinctively he looked for the suitcase but discovered that she was carrying two brown paper parcels instead.

"Good evening," he said. "Is it—I mean are you—?"

"Oh yes. I've had it all right," she said, and as though this was the really big joke of the day, laughed splendidly, throwing back her red hair. "I knew I would. It was on the cards."

"I'm awfully sorry," Fred said. "I'm really awfully sorry."

"Oh, don't let's mope about it," she said. "Let's have that drink I promised you. I could use one. I've got a thirst on me like a fish."

"May I carry your parcels?"

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"Well, thanks. Be careful, though. All I got in the world."

There were gramophone records in the flat parcel and all her clothes in the other, she explained as she and Fred went into the lounge bar of The Devonshire Arms, halfway up the avenue, where Fred insisted on ordering the first drink, a beer for himself and a double gin for her.

Sipping beer, Fred felt nervous and worried. What in the world, he asked, was she going to do?

"I'm damned if I know," she said. "I hoped someone would tell me." The inevitable laugh set her head shaking over her gin. "I can always doss in the park."

No, no, no. Fred was full of nervous protest. That wouldn't do at all.

"Why not?" she said. "It's warm. Worse things happen at sea."

When her gin had gone, with much the same rapidity as Fred had noticed at lunch-time, she insisted on ordering another. At the same time Fred protested that the single beer would see him through. This she called plain silly on a hot evening and urged him to drink up and be sociable.

Slightly heady after a second beer, Fred had no substantial word of objection to offer when suddenly, on a quick impulse, she seized his hand and said, "Come on, let's take a walk across the park. There must be a nice tree somewhere I could sleep under."

But soon, as they walked across the park, she was impulsive again. "Oh, it's too hot to walk. Come on, let's find a seat somewhere."

Late white acacia blossom had fallen on the grass where the seat stood. In the middle distance mallard ducks swam about a pond.

"That's a funny bird," she said, after sitting there five minutes or so. "It's got something tied to its leg."

Fred, looking up, saw that Francis had arrived and was perching among the lower branches of the acacia tree. "Oh, it's Francis."

"Who? What?"

"Francis. Our jackdaw."

The girl, giving him a quick, disbelieving glance, curiously enough without laughter, was amazed a moment later to hear Fred whistle the bird, which promptly flew down and settled on the park seat beside him.

"Hullo, Francis," Fred said. "You're out a bit late."

"What's it got on its leg?"

"Oh, just one of Aggie's messages."

"Aggie? Who's Aggie?"

"Aggie's my eldest sister."

"Message? Message to who?"

Fred explained that it wasn't necessarily to anything or anybody in particular. It was just general. Sort of he who runs may read.

"Yes, but who's it for?"

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"Anybody. Anybody who picks it up."

"Me, for instance?"

"You, if you like. Yes."

This time she did laugh, but neither so loudly nor sumptuously as usual. The sound was brief and sceptical.

"All right. Let's see what it says."

Fred took the message off Francis' leg, unfolded it, and read out what it said. *Ban the Bomb. One Peace. One World.*

"Oh, that old stuff again."

It was enough to bore you to bits, the girl said. Why didn't she write something to cheer people up? People wanted fun.

"I could think of a few good things to write," she said. "Something to pep things up. Like *I love Charley Williams. Kiss me, Charley. Quick.*"

Between her gusts of laughter, Fred managed to ask who Charley Williams was.

"Our manager. At the shop."

Fred said he didn't think on the whole that confessions and invitations to Charley Williams were really much in Aggie's line. No: it had to be something for the public good.

"All right," she said. "What about *Why Don't We Have More Beds in the Park? We got to sleep somewhere.*"

Levity, Fred explained, was not a thing Aggie went in for.

Fred was about to let Francis go when the girl said, "Come on. Let's have some fun. I dare you. Let's think up a really good one and send it."

"No, no. It wouldn't be fair to Aggie."

"Are all your sisters like her?"

Not exactly, Fred told her, not exactly.

"What are the others like? Do they send messages?"

Fred, eyes pressingly fixed on the mallard ducks, first told her briefly about Flossie.

Then, a little less briefly, he told her about Ella. He explained that Ella was touchy, but that was because she was so completely, so blindly dedicated. She was utterly wrapped up in what she did. The world just went past her.

"And what does she do?"

"Most of the time she prays for animals."

"What sort of animals?"

"Squirrels because they're getting so rare. Hedgehogs because so many of them get run over. She thinks animals have souls, you see. She explained it all to me a long time ago."

The girl glanced sideways at the pensive, floating lozenges of Fred's eyes. All of a sudden she found them very touching and said, "What about the tortoise? Does she pray for that?"

"William? She has William up in her room every Friday and they have a little communion together."

She seemed to consider this for a moment or two and then said, "Do you ever do anything with the tortoise?"

"I take him for walks sometimes."

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After another pause the girl said, " It's no good. I'll have to go. I've got to find somewhere for the night. We've been sitting here for ages."

" Haven't you got any friends you can go to? "

" Not really. You see, I don't come from here. I'm a stranger here. Have you a lot of friends? "

" Not really," Fred said.

" That makes two of us," she said. " Come on. Let's go."

Fred, who had been sitting holding Francis, let the bird go so suddenly that it was like the slap of a blind going up.

" Goodness gracious, I've forgotten Aggie's letters."

Disconsolately, he took the nine letters from his pocket and stared at them. " She'd never forgive me."

" Here, give them to me," the girl said. " I'll carry them."

While Fred gathered up the parcels, the girl took the letters, glancing idly at them. The top one was for Gandhi.

" What's the idea of writing to people if they're dead? "

" It makes it more worthwhile. I mean for Aggie."

The girl, for once, had neither laugh nor word to offer in answer and suddenly Fred felt that it was useless to try to explain any more about Aggie and Ella and how they felt and what they did. It was difficult to give a rational picture of the girls. He supposed he'd got used to it; it didn't seem strange to him.

" Do you mind if I ask you something? " he said. He was eager to change the subject now. " I got another bottle of gin this afternoon and I wondered if you'd care to come up for a drink? Then perhaps we can really decide what you're going to do."

" Lovely," she said. " I was just going to suggest we dropped in at The Devonshire for another one, but if you've got the gin— By the way, where's the nearest postbox? We mustn't forget the letters."

Later, in the stable loft, where the light was falling a little now, she sat much as she had done at lunch-time, glass in hand, legs stretched out on the sofa.

Fred, beer in hand, glad that she hadn't opened up the subject of Aggie and Ella again, listened to the sounds of evening in the garden outside. A late blackbird was singing beautifully somewhere beyond the catalpa tree and once he thought he heard the croak of Francis coming home.

" I'm worried about you," he said. " You hear such awful stories about girls being out at night. Are you sure you've got nowhere to go? "

What she said next startled him completely, even though it was merely an echo of what he himself had been thinking.

" Could I stay here? I mean temporary. Just for one night? "

" I'd got it in my mind," Fred said, " to ask you that."

" I could manage the sofa."

" All right," he said. " I'll go and get blankets and things."

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"Thanks," she said. "That's terribly good of you. Will your sisters know? Will they see?"

"I don't think so," he said. "The house is too far away."

In ten minutes he was back from the house with sheets, pillows, and blankets. While she started to arrange them on the sofa he went back to the house for bread, the remains of steak-and-kidney pie, and a basin of cold gooseberries and custard. As she started eating this in the half darkness he went back to the house a third time for a jug of water, soap and towel, a washbasin, and the candle-holder from his bedroom.

"There is electric light, but I think the candle's safer. Only light it, though, if you really have to. It might look strange. Ella gets up a lot in the night and she might think there was a fire."

"I thought you said it was too far away."

"She walks about the garden sometimes."

In some curious way it was now the girl, not he, who seemed uneasy. The habit of laughter had died abruptly. She had even begun to speak in whispers.

Presently Fred became infected by whispering too, and said in the lowest of voices, "I think you've got everything. I'll bring breakfast for you in the morning. About seven."

"Thank you."

The bed on the sofa was made now and she was sitting on it. Then suddenly she got up and found her empty glass.

"You don't mind if I have one more? I feel I need it."

Fred, who could still make out the details of her face in the half darkness, saw her eyes uplifted sharply, and suddenly he knew that they were older than he had first guessed they were.

"Look," she said. She took a quick drink, holding the glass in front of her face. "I got to tell you something. I got to be fair with you. It's about why I left my sister. Why she kicked me out."

"I thought you just didn't get on together."

She held up the glass. This time it masked her eyes and she spoke blankly from behind it. "It's why I'm on this. On the gin," she said. "They say it does the trick sometimes."

It slowly occurred to Fred that he was listening to a confessional the details of which he didn't remotely understand. He heard the blackbird giving a final roosting cry in the garden. Across the street, in the hot night, the sash of a window squeaked dryly and the window clattered down.

"I got to be fair with you. I'm in trouble. I'm going to have a baby," she said. "That's why." She drank the rest of the gin with a useless sort of laugh, quickly. "I've had it. Good and proper. I'm up the creek."

There were a dozen questions he wanted to ask her when he took her breakfast up in the morning but she was sleeping peacefully, and in the end he simply said, "Sorry to wake you, but it's ten past seven."

"Best sleep I've had for weeks." She sat up in bed and ran

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one hand through her hair. "I feel as right as a row of houses. Boiled eggs and toast, eh? How did you know I liked them?"

"I didn't," Fred said. "They were just the easiest things to carry."

"Thanks, anyway. It's very good of you."

While she sat there eating the eggs and sipping tea, Fred sat down in the old Windsor chair and asked the first of his questions. He hadn't slept very well himself; questions had troubled him all night long.

"What about tonight?" he said. "It's been worrying me. You could come back here if you wanted to."

"I'll think about it. It's very good of you. Could I leave my things anyway?"

He said of course she could leave her things and then he asked the second of his questions. It was about the baby. He meant—

"Oh, I know what you mean. Who's responsible? Oh, he's three hundred miles away in Plymouth. I couldn't even raise the fare."

Actually it wasn't that at all, Fred said. He wouldn't think of asking a personal thing like that. No: it was just that he wondered how long it would be before—

"Oh, not for months yet. Ages. Anyway, like I said, let's not mope about it." Presently she finished the second of the eggs and then spread marmalade on a piece of toast while Fred watched her solemnly. "Look," she said. She pointed the piece of toast at him with something like reproach. "I'll come back here tonight on one condition."

"What would that be?"

"That you don't mope about me. I can't bear moping."

"But it's a serious matter for you."

"Oh, don't get the idea I've been betrayed and all that stuff. I knew what I was doing all right, don't worry. Like I told you before, I love having fun. That's what life's for."

Fred, for so long surrounded by the vanity, good works, and dedication of his sisters, hadn't looked at life in exactly that way before and he had nothing to say in answer.

"You know what I thought?" she said. "It'd be fun to make up messages for Francis to take out—you know, like I said last night."

No, that would be unethical, Fred said. It wouldn't be fair to Aggie.

"Are any of them fair to you? From what you told me I don't think they're very fair."

While Fred sat solemnly considering whether in fact his sisters were fair to him or not, she laughed again and said, "Well, this won't get the ironing done. I've got to be down at the shop by eight. I've got to get dressed."

"I'm sorry," Fred said. "I'll go now. Don't worry about the breakfast things or anything. I'll do all that."

"Thanks again for the breakfast," she said. She handed Fred

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the breakfast tray and he took it and set it on the table. "One thing I missed though."

"Oh, I'm sorry if—"

"Just a drop of music, that's all. I always have a record or two on for breakfast. Gives the day a nice start. Haven't got a gramophone, I suppose?"

Fred said he thought they had, somewhere, but it was old, twenty years old, perhaps more.

"Wouldn't play the modern speeds," she said. "Ah well, not to worry."

And then, just before she pushed back the bedclothes and swung her legs to the floor, she said something that struck Fred, already at the head of the stable stairs, as the oddest thing of all.

"Not having music is the one thing that makes me lonely."

It was this sentence, and nothing else, that dominated his mind all morning, haunting as a snatch of music he couldn't identify. And once again it made him forgetful: forgetful first of Aggie, the post, and the papers; then of Flossie, who had specially asked to be called early, at half past ten; and finally forgetful of Ella and the tortoise, whose day for communion it was.

It was nearly half past eleven before he remembered William; and then, having remembered him, he could find no sign of him in the garden. Twenty minutes' search brought no sight of the trailing string.

Finally he went upstairs to Ella's room and stood outside the door. "Ella, I'm terribly sorry. There's no sign of William. I can't find him anywhere."

"Don't be silly. You've got to find him. It's Friday."

"Yes, I know. But sometimes he gets off the string."

"Nobody has left the gate open, have they? You know what happened once before." Once William had been found far away, trundling steadily down the avenue. "I'm scared he'll get run over."

"I don't think anyone would—"

"Well, go and see!" Her voice was imperious and fretful.

A quarter of an hour later he was relieved to find William behind the compost heap, in the farthest corner of the kitchen garden, eating lettuce leaves in the shade of a plum tree.

"I found him, Ella. I've got him here."

Ella, in an old-fashioned white tennis frock, appeared at her bedroom door to snatch William from him like a long lost child. "Oh, the lamb, my lamb. I prayed hard for you, darling. I prayed all the time. I knew you'd come."

Oblivious of Fred, she shut the door. Fred called, "Ella, I'm going out for half an hour or so. I've got a little shopping to do. Is there anything I can bring you for lunch?"

"You know I never eat on Fridays," she said. "You know it's my fasting day."

That was something else he had forgotten completely. Then as he went downstairs he realised that he hadn't seen Francis all

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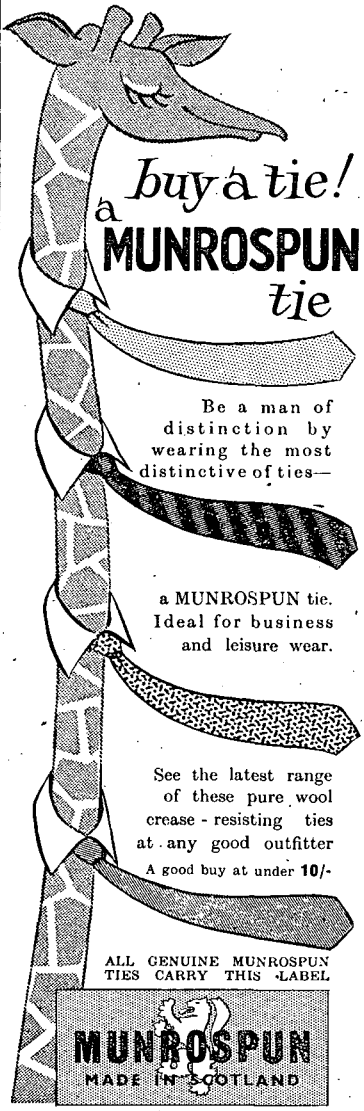
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morning either. Perhaps Francis was lost too. The day would surely come, as Aggie feared, when Francis would be eaten by a cat. Fred rushed into the garden, giving a piercing whistle on his fingers.

To his relief he saw Francis perched on Aggie's windowsill, dutifully waiting her call, and with that moment of relief he felt the dominating, haunting tune of the girl's odd words lift itself from his mind for the first time that morning.

Two minutes later he was walking briskly, not quite in the old absent way, but almost buoyantly, down the avenue.

He had made up his mind to buy a gramophone.

After that the girl came back every evening to sleep in the loft above the stable. From the dairy she brought butter, bacon, milk, eggs, and tins of various foods, and Fred cooked her an evening meal.

Always, as soon as she came in, she put on the gramophone. She played pop records such as *What Do You Want If You Don't Want Money?* and *What Do You Want To Make Those Eyes at Me For?* She had another record called *Possess Me* and she played it every evening while she sat eating, over and over again. There was another called *It's Time to Cry*, and she never listened to it except with a smile on her face, her elbows crooked on the table, her long pointed chin in her hands.

She knew all the words of the records, even the new ones, and she sang them in a low, shadowy, crooning sort of way. The ones she played most were almost her own, and sometimes she added a word of her own. "*What Do You Want If You Don't Want Money?*" she sang. But more often, "*What Do You Want If You Don't Want Love?*" It was as if she was singing them not to herself but to someone who wasn't there, a third person far away.

"It was a wonderful thought of yours to get the gramophone," she was always saying. "I felt so lonely without it. Funny feeling. Like when you listen sometimes and you think, Oh my God, my heart's stopped beating. You know that feeling, don't you?"

Fred didn't know that feeling. His feelings generally were becoming chaotic, inconclusive, hard to define. The single recurrent simplicity that ran through them was that the days, from eight in the morning to six in the evening, were terribly empty. Only the evenings seemed now worth living for.

All his life the days had been very full; there was always so much to do for the girls; he had been so absorbed in the needs of Aggie, Ella, and Flossie that he had never even stopped to ask himself if, after all, they were not stupid, frivolous, wholly inessential needs. There had been no more need to question them all than there had been to question the colour of the sky or that of the leaves on the catalpa tree.

The time had been when he liked the loneliness the stable gave; he actually looked forward to it as a solace, a restoration

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at the end of the day. Now when he sat up there alone he found it was merely a painful experience; he was haunted by prolonged, endless echoes. The air was full of the sound of the girl's sharp laughter, or her voice crooning pop songs towards hidden distances and of the round of repetitious words: *What Do You Want If You Don't Want Love? What Do You Want If You Don't Want Me?*

Presently he began to try to think of ways of softening the edge of loneliness. It occurred to him that William would keep him company. William was a companion who was silent, who never answered back. But when at last he took the tortoise up to the stable loft it was like having an unhappy marching prisoner there on a treadmill, hard feet endlessly scraping, to no purpose, on the bare wood floor.

Soon he had another idea. He took Joey and Mr. Sylvester up to the loft in their cage and hung the cage in the window overlooking the garden. The broken edge of chestnut shade left the window bright but cool. The two birds seemed to like the change of scene from the kitchen and Mr. Sylvester chattered continually, repeating such things as, " Everything in the garden's lovely! What about a day at Brighton? Have a nice ripe tomato! "

When the girl came back that evening she was as excited by the budgerigars as she had been by the gramophone. She sang bright snatches of song to them while Fred did his best, in his slow way, to explain about Joey and Mr. Sylvester—how Joey had always been the lazy, backward one and Mr. Sylvester the quick, clever one, always eager to learn.

" I think he'd have made a good politician," Fred said. " Never at a loss for an answer."

" Can he sing? " she said.

" I've never tried him but I wouldn't be surprised if he could."

After that she frequently sang through the bars of the cage to Mr. Sylvester, who looked intelligently back at her while she repeated such things as *I Gotta Have You* and eventually the words of an older song which went:

When I was a Young Girl and Never Been Kissed,
I Got To Thinking What I Had Missed.

In another week or two Mr. Sylvester could trill out, after a fashion, the first line of the song, and about the same time the girl had actually induced Joey, the reluctant one, to say the two words *Possess Me,* chirped out as a sort of chorus.

" I wish I could teach Mr. Sylvester all that song," the girl said. " Especially the end. You know—the bit about ' Kisses sweeter than wine.' "

Every evening, after saying good night to the girl and politely shaking hands and telling her he hoped she would sleep well, Fred took the budgerigars back to the kitchen and covered them over for the night.

In the morning he uncovered them as usual and Mr. Sylvester greeted him with a mixture of both old and new quotations—*When I Was a Young Girl and Never Been Kissed What About a*

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Day at Brighton? and sometimes Joey said, *Good Morning. Possess Me.*

One morning Flossie made one of her very rare pre-noon appearances in the kitchen to ask Fred, rather pettishly, how it came about that the steak for Bobo, her poodle, was chopped so coarsely?

Before Fred could reply that he'd been extra busy gathering and bottling the season's first plums, Mr. Sylvester sang out, "Dig that, baby! What Do You Want If You Don't Want Love? Have a nice ripe tomato!"

"Possess me!" Joey chirped. "Possess me!"

In an offended way Flossie asked with unfriendly astonishment what Fred thought Mr. Sylvester was doing? Where did he pick up that kind of thing?

"Oh, he picks anything up," Fred said. "It's a song. You know Mr. Sylvester."

"I must say I think it's awfully vulgar. I don't know what Aggie would say if she heard."

"I can't help it," Fred said. "He hears it on the radio."

"But you don't have the radio in here. You hardly have it on at all."

"I've started to have it on a good deal more than I used to," Fred said. "It keeps me from being lonely."

"Don't be silly. You're not lonely. You've far too much to do."

"When I was a young man and never been kissed," Mr. Sylvester suddenly sang to the even cooler and more unfriendly astonishment of Flossie, who said, "Really. I'm off now."

"Will you be back for lunch?"

"No. I'm going to lunch with some of the girls and we're going to play bridge in the afternoon."

"Dig that, baby!" Mr. Sylvester said. "That sends me!"

Over after-lunch coffee at the club Flossie, still perturbed by Mr. Sylvester, asked Mrs. Freemantle, one of the girls, if she had ever heard of a song that began *What Do You Want If You Don't Want Love?* or something like that.

Mrs. Freemantle said she had. It was one of the pops you were always hearing on the radio, but why did it interest Flossie?

Flossie said she regretted Fred had taught it to Mr. Sylvester, one of the budgerigars, together with other phrases, mostly vulgar slang.

"By the way, I ran into Fred yesterday morning," Mrs. Freemantle said. "In the wine merchant's."

"Oh? I didn't think Fred ever went to the wine merchant's."

"Well, this was Fred's double then. He was looking remarkably spruce and smart, I thought."

"Spruce? That sounds absolutely unlike Fred."

"Spruce, I tell you. Very. In a new alpaca jacket. Ordering half a dozen of gin."

"Gin? You're dreaming. Fred never drank gin in his life."

"Oh well, it's the same colour as water," Mrs. Freemantle

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1. **THE WHITE 'KERNEL'** of the wheat grain. This is mainly starch, and the experts call it the endosperm.
2. **THE HUSK OR BRAN.** This is the tough, fibrous outer skin of the grain, which our digestive systems cannot absorb.
3. **THE WHEATGERM.** This contains a high proportion of the wheat's nourishing properties.

Now what happens to these three parts of the wheat once they have been separated? That depends upon what kind of flour the miller intends to make. For instance . . .

WHITE FLOUR is made from the white endosperm alone. The bran is taken out and used to make animal foods. The wheatgerm goes too—and to make up for its loss, synthetic vitamins and other nutrients are added.

BROWN FLOUR varies, but usually contains endosperm, part of the wheatgerm, and a fair proportion of bran. Wholemeal flour is made from the whole grain, with nothing added and nothing taken away.

HOVIS FLOUR. This is natural, creamy-white flour, from which all the indigestible bran has been taken away. The wheatgerm has gone, too—but only temporarily. It is lightly toasted to improve its flavour and then put back into the flour. *Then extra wheatgerm is added, so that the bread contains about eight times the normal amount.*

Well, now you know the facts, what do you think? Have we been fair to say 'Don't just say brown — say Hovis'? Or should we go even further and say . . .

Don't just say *bread* — say Hovis

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said. "He was asking about the price of a Sylvaner Riesling too."

"What's a Sylvaner Riesling?"

"It's a rather pleasant white wine," Mrs. Freemantle said. "We have it at home sometimes. George is fond of it. It's light and cool in the warm weather."

Flossie, flushed and fussy, stirred her coffee with an imperious spoon. "I don't know whether to believe you or not," she said. "I really don't. White wine? I don't suppose we've had a bottle in the house for twenty years. And what in heaven's name, pray, would Fred be doing with half a dozen of gin?"

"Drinking it, dear," Mrs. Freemantle said. "That's what men usually do."

Soon, in addition to teaching Joey and Mr. Sylvester new words for their vocabulary, the girl was teaching something new to Fred.

"Just let your whole body go, Fred. That's it. Loosely, loosely—that's better. Let your knees go. And swing a bit—swing."

"You know, I really haven't danced since—"

"Never too late to learn."

Dancing, Fred had several times explained, wasn't much in his line. A waltz or two, many, many years ago, as it seemed generations past, remained as his last surviving memory in that direction. Tennis dances were then, he told her, all the rage. Flannel dances they were sometimes called. You wore your tennis flannels and your blazers and the girls their tennis frocks.

"And straw hats?"

"Oh, often. Straw hats, yes."

The girl told him she loved that. She laughed uproariously, with all her beguiling infectious brightness, at the thought of straw hats. "Had you a moustache in those days?"

Fred confessed that he had begun to grow the moustache at nineteen. He had longed, in the natural fashion of youth, to look older.

"I like your moustache. It would look great waxed at the ends. And you in a straw hat."

"I like this tune," Fred said. They were dancing up and down the floor of the loft, in the falling light of a late August evening, to a tune called *April Heart*. "I used to think the tunes you hear nowadays couldn't compare with the old ones, but I'm not so sure."

"Some of the old ones are still good."

"There used to be one about *Keeps Raining All The Time*. That was good."

"Very good. I'm beginning to believe you were gay in those days."

"No. Not me."

"Lots of girls?"

Fred could only smile.

"No? Don't tell me you're like the young man in the song. You know—'When I Was a Young Man and Never Been Kissed.'"

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"Well—" Fred said.

A few light taps on the windowpane several minutes later announced the arrival of Francis, who sat droopingly on the sill outside, waiting to be let in. The girl opened the window and took the bird in her two hands, stroking his back feathers with a soothing forefinger. "He looks tired, poor thing. He's worn out. You can hear his little heart thumping like a dynamo."

"I rather fancy he's had a long day," Fred said. "I saw him go off at seven this morning. Aggie has these days."

"He's flat out." Francis actually sagged, a moment later, and flopped in her hands. "She'll kill this bird. He needs a drink. What shall we give him? Gin? Let's give him a sip. We'll have one too."

Fred thought both ideas were good. He had begun to like gin; it cheered him up; after a glass or two he really began to feel like living. To his surprise, Francis liked it too. He responded to a tumbler of gin and water by standing up, shaking his feathers, and giving a croak.

Fred laughed. "Wonderful," he said. "I'd never have thought of giving him gin."

"Why not?" the girl said. "Look what it does for you. Two gins and you're as bright as a pearl button. Drink up—let's have another."

Fred readily poured another gin for himself and one for the

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girl. They were getting through two or three bottles a week comfortably now.

"Affects people in different ways, gin," the girl said. "Makes some people moody and depressed. Some suicidal. Used to make my sister really vicious."

"How does it make you feel?"

"Oh, sort of affectionate. Whoosy. Want to love strangers. You know."

She sat down on the sofa, curled up her legs, and looked dreamily at Francis, still taking sips of gin and water from the tumbler on the table. "Where does he sleep? Francis, I mean?"

"In the catalpa tree, I think. In summer, that is. I'm not sure about winter."

"I think it's a shame. Working him all day like that. You know what I think? I think we should tie a protest message on his leg."

"Oh, I don't think Aggie—"

"Who cares about Aggie? Think of something good."

Fred, sipping gin in a fast-gathering twilight across which the jackdaw looked no more than a charred heap of paper in the centre of the table, made so little effort to think of something good to tie on Francis' leg that the girl actually accused him from the sofa. "You're not thinking. I know. I can feel it."

"Yes, I am. But actually—"

"No, you're not. You're leaving it to me. Oh well—" She laughed again, more to herself than anything this time. "How about this then? What say we send him off with this?" She laughed a second time, brilliantly. "*On strike for shorter hours and more gin.* Eh? Come on, find a piece of paper. Let's write it down."

Fred laughed too. She thought of crazy things, he said.

Less than half a minute after Francis had been released from the window with the strike message on his leg, the girl turned abruptly to Fred and said, "You were going to tell me something just now, weren't you? When you said you were thinking?"

"Well, I don't know—"

"You were. I could sort of feel it in the darkness."

A candle was burning on the table now. The girl was sitting in the Windsor chair in her favourite attitude, her pointed chin in her cupped hands, staring at the heart of the flame. Her hair was a cone of fire; in the reflected candlelight her eyes were bright, concentrated buttonholes of yellow.

"Well, actually it was just this," Fred said. "I didn't know whether to tell you or not—but tomorrow's my birthday."

"Oh, good. I love birthdays. I'll take you out—"

"No," Fred said. "I sort of got a little thing planned for up here. A rather special supper. And a bottle of wine." He started to make odd noises, as if to indicate apology. "I suppose, after fifty, you don't really bother about birthday parties, but I thought—" If the sentence had continued it would have been to convey, somehow, that he knew there wouldn't be another time. It

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was his last chance, or thereabouts, of celebrating with her.

"Oh, that's lovely," she said. "I shall think about it all day. Are you going to invite Francis too? I hope so. Then we can think up another good message to send."

It was eleven o'clock before he finally got up to say good night. He was a little fuzzy with gin, but stable enough, and happy. She always came as far as the top of the old staircase to say good night to him, generally with the candle in her hands, so that she could light the stairs and he wouldn't miss his footing.

That night, as always, there was an awkward pause before he said, "Well, good night. I hope you sleep well."

"Good night, Fred," she said. "Sleep well too."

Fred stretched out his right hand. She was carrying the candle in her left. "It isn't quite your birthday yet," she said. "But you can kiss me good night if you want to."

Fred's face was blank in the near candlelight. His paralysed hand stayed for fully half a minute outstretched in air.

"Don't you want to?"

Fred, without actually moving his head, gave a despairing glance at the candle.

"I can put the candle down," she said.

A moment later she stooped and put the candle on the floor. Then she stood up, took his face in her two hands, and put her lips full on his mouth.

For the next thirty or forty seconds Fred could think only of some words he had once heard her say: Like when you listen sometimes and you think, Oh my God, my heart's stopped beating. He knew that feeling now.

When she broke away at last she looked at his face, not blank now but crossed with shadow in the upward light of the candle-flame, and said, "Happy birthday." She smiled. "I've just remembered something. You haven't still got your straw hat, have you?"

"I might have. I think it's quite probable."

"Not the blazer too?"

"I *think* I probably have."

She gave the briefest of laughs, her eyes dancing, and said, "Bring them tomorrow. Put them on tomorrow. You'd look so gay."

He promised to do his best to find them and then stepped aside, ready to go downstairs. To his surprise she still stood there, not moving. The candle was still on the floor and in a strange way the upcast light of it made her seem much taller than she was.

"You can kiss me again," she said, "if you want to."

For the second time she reached out, held his face in her hands, and kissed him full on the mouth. All the time his hands hung loosely against his sides.

"Good night now," she said. "I'll remember every birthday you ever have."

When at last he started to walk across the garden, he suddenly

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stopped, turned, and walked some distance back again. In a sky now fully dark the stars seemed of intense, exceptional brightness. The stars of August always seemed the largest, most luminous of the year, but tonight, he thought, they looked miraculous.

He sat for a long time under the catalpa tree, looking up at them beyond the fringe of leaves. He could only think, caught up in a web of new confusion, that the many stars were really too brilliant altogether. There was something unreal about that special kind of brightness.

He sat there half the night, watching them. He didn't think much but all the time he was oppressed by an uncomfortable feeling that their brightness couldn't last much longer now.

"It was a lovely idea to have Joey and Mr. Sylvester to the party," the girl said. "It wouldn't have been the same without them."

By six o'clock next evening Joey and Mr. Sylvester were in their cage by the window in the stable loft, though with the door of the cage open, so that they were free to fly about whenever they felt inclined. They felt inclined, in fact, every half minute or so and made sudden fluttering blue-and-yellow excursions across the room, attracted mostly by the four scarlet candles already alight in a silver candelabra set in the middle of the round Victorian table. Once Mr. Sylvester perched himself on top of an orange in a big glass bowl of fruit, but Fred promptly picked him off, scolding him gently.

Mr. Sylvester perched on Fred's left forefinger and gave him a silent sideways glance, quizzical and calculating, as if he thought that Fred was pretty dumb. Fred, half as if thinking so too, smiled apologetically and appeased him by saying to the girl, "Well, he really does sing quite nicely now. Thanks to you, of course. I'd never have thought of teaching him all the things you have. I'd simply never have thought he could do them."

"Good evening," Mr. Sylvester suddenly chirped, "nice evening. What's for supper?"

"I didn't teach him that one," the girl said, laughing. "You taught him that."

"What's for supper?" Mr. Sylvester said.

"Wait and see." Fred, who was wearing his blazer, sipped at his second large pink gin.

There was something very stimulating, he had discovered, about pink gin. It lifted him up. The blazer, with its vertical black, red, and yellow stripes, lifted him up too. Everything in sight lifted him up: the scarlet candles, the sudden flight of the two birds, his straw hat lying on the sofa with its black, red, and yellow hatband, his red tie with its design of small white unicorns, and the two tall slender green bottles of white wine standing side by side in the candlelight. He had never been so lifted up in his life; it was a new reality.

He was entranced above all by the dress the girl was wearing.

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He had never seen it before. It was sleeveless and white, with a big overall design of crimson roses flowering from sprays of emerald leaves. The skirt was stiff and stood out from her legs, scalloped as a shell. The neck was low and round, leaving her chest and shoulders bare.

A third pink gin, and then a fourth, took him beyond his first clear entrancements into what he thought was an even clearer appraisal of the colour of her skin. It was a pure creamy yellow, he kept telling himself, like the skin of a ripe pear.

And now and then, as she bent down to pick up her glass or an almond or a biscuit from the table, the neck of the dress fell loosely away and he found himself looking down at the smoky hollow between the upper curves of her breasts. Each time it set him trembling and each time, as she straightened up again, he looked shyly and swiftly away.

It was after nine o'clock and two more pink gins before he started to open, with slightly uncertain hands, the first of the bottles of white wine. The wine, too, immediately began to uplift him. There was something about it that was remarkably young and cool and gay. He had managed also to find the correct tall green glasses to serve it in and sometimes these, it seemed, were ten feet high.

All the time the gramophone played shrill, swinging tunes. A dance between melon and lobster mayonnaise, another between lobster and salad, another and yet another between salad and fruit took him so far out of himself that he was presently no longer aware that he was eating and dancing with the straw hat on the back of his head.

It was nearly eleven o'clock when he started to open the second of the bottles of wine. By that time the meal was over and he was sitting on the sofa, laughing a good deal and trying to stick the point of the corkscrew into the cork.

Suddenly his straw hat fell off and rolled on the floor. The girl picked it up and put it on her own head and posed in front of him, hands on hips, her rosy skirt flared out, and said, "How do I look in it? How does your hat suit me?"

A strange youngness, a totally unexpected simplicity, seemed suddenly to spring out of her. The hat seemed to confer on her a sort of childishness. She was suddenly a rampant, truant schoolgirl: something out of another age, out of his own youth, a thousand years away.

Some long time later, still sitting on his sofa, pouring wine, he was aware of her, still with the straw hat on, urging him to put the bottle away. "Put it away and sit still," she said. "How can I manage it if you don't sit still?"

"Manage what? What are you doing to my face?"

"Waxing your moustache. I want you to look period."

"But they didn't wear them like that in my day," Fred said. "At least—waxing it? Waxing it what with?"

"Mayonnaise. Hold still if you don't want it in your eye."

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Five minutes later he was on his feet again and she was telling him, between peals of laughter, how splendid he looked. Marvellous: real period, the real dandy. She said something about looking years younger too and Fred echoed it with a rising bark of pride. By God, he told himself, all his new uplifted reality abruptly flaring into abandon, he felt it too. The tripe that was talked about age!—the tripe that was talked about age!

Mr. Sylvester, startled by the barking joy of Fred's voice, suddenly flew down to within inches of the candle-flames. A moment later the girl picked an orange off the fruit dish and then, as a record came to its end, went over to the gramophone to put on another number.

To Fred's increasing joy it was one of his favourites. Fred caught the girl by the waist. She still had the orange in one hand. With the fingertips of the other she held Fred lightly at the shoulder. In rapt abstraction he gazed into the brilliant grey-green eyes, which started to come closer and closer, and then found his forehead finally meeting hers, the orange held between.

Like that, arms outstretched, the orange held between the two foreheads like a ball, they started to dance through the number that Fred liked so much that sometimes he actually bellowed out the words. *Samson and Delilah were a handsome pair,*
Until she went and—cut off his hair.

Several minutes later, as from the end of a vault, he heard a rasping voice trying to make itself heard above the din of the gramophone.

"Fred! What on earth do you suppose you are doing? Fred!"

The orange dropped to the floor. Turning to pick it up he saw Aggie, Ella, and Flossie standing at the head of the stairs. All three were wearing dressing-gowns, as if they had just been roused from bed, and Flossie's frilly hair was actually in curling-pins.

He picked up the orange, speechless. Through the continuing beat of the gramophone he kept telling himself he must be drunk, blind drunk. He was seeing things; he was off his head. The girls were simply not there. They couldn't be. Aggie for instance hadn't been downstairs, out of purdah, for a dozen years.

"Fred! Who is this girl?" Aggie said.

"My friend."

"She's the girl from the dairy," Flossie almost shouted. "That's her. She's the one I've been hearing all the rumours about. The one Mrs. Freemantle told me—"

"Is that right?" Aggie said. "Is she from the dairy?"

"Yes. I'm from the dairy," the girl said. "What's wrong with that?"

"I am not addressing you."

"Fred, you look a terrible sight," Ella said. "What on earth have you been doing with your moustache?"

Fred, grinning, twirled the ends of his moustache with his fingertips without saying a word.

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"A meal? Wine." Aggie, staring at the table with distraught severity, suddenly threw back her head. "And how much longer am I supposed to shout against that wretched gramophone?"

Fred, after a couple of uncertain jabs, lifted the arm off the record, and Flossie said, "That was what I could hear all the time. It sounded like a circus."

"What is this girl doing here?" Aggie said.

"Having fun," Fred said. "She also sleeps here."

"That's right," the girl said.

"Fred!" Ella said. "Fred!"

"Absolute fact," Fred said. He turned to the girl with something like a giggle. "How long is it now, Kitty? Two months or more?"

"You're either drunk or lying. Both of you," Aggie said. "How could it possibly be all that time? We'd have known."

"Would you? Well, we're going on strike next week," Fred said, giggling again. "For shorter hours and more gin."

"I dislike jokes. Especially of that sort." Aggie stood in the centre of the floor like a grey, panting bloodhound. "And also jokes that are tied on Francis. Fred, have you gone mad?"

"Probably," Fred said.

"Ask about the other business," Flossie said. "Ask her, Aggie."

"Don't bother," the girl said. "Yes, I'm going to have a baby. Everybody knows that by now. You can't keep a thing like that to yourself."

"Oh, my dear lord!" Ella said. "I shall have to go back to the house. I can't bear all this. I'm beginning to feel sick—" She turned to make for the head of the stairs but succeeded only in freezing herself to the upper handrail.

"Fred, how on earth could you do this to us?" Flossie said.

"This is my den," Fred said, "and what I do in it—"

"A baby," Aggie said. "Fred, it's utterly disgusting. You're fifty-eight today. Are you supposed to be celebrating this repulsive episode, or what?"

"Oh! Tell it to Gandhi," the girl said. "Don't be damn silly. Fred's not responsible."

"I suppose you expect us to believe that?" Aggie said. "That I'm not surprised to hear."

"Then if he's not responsible," Flossie started to shout, almost hysterical now, "why have you been sleeping here?"

"It would take a long time to explain," the girl said.

For the space of several seconds nobody had anything to say. In the meantime Ella had begun to make sounds like those of a blubbering saucepan at the head of the stairs. Mr. Sylvester, on a completely speechless flight from one side of the loft to the other, as if awe had silenced him too, flew into the cage and settled down close by Joey, who looked sleepy and didn't even say "Possess Me."

"This girl must get out of here at once," Aggie said. "She cannot stay here."

"She'll go when she's ready," Fred said. "Not a minute before."

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" I'll go," the girl said. " Tie me round the leg of a jackdaw and let me fly away."

" It's unreal," Ella sobbed. " It's so unreal. I feel it's never happened."

The notion of unreality suddenly woke in Fred the habit of ready laughter he had learnt from the girl. That was good, he told them all expansively.

Guffawing, he seized the bottle of wine, waved it about, and poured himself another glass.

Unreal? That was good. He guffawed loudly again.

" You have put us all in a terrible position in the town," Aggie said.

" Dig that," Mr. Sylvester said. " That sends me—"

" You've made even the birds sound vulgar," Flossie said.

" What birds? " Fred said, laughing. " I don't see any. Birds? They're unreal. Everything here's unreal."

From the stairs Ella started to blubber that Fred was drunk. In attitudes of comfort, pressing against her, Flossie looked more than ever like an oversized marshmallow, her podgy hands waving in agonies of pink protestation.

" Sober as a newt," Fred said. " Sober as—"

" Fred, you're being flippant," Aggie said, " and in view of the seriousness—"

" Frivolous," Fred said. " That's the word. Not flippant. Eh, Mr. Sylvester? Frivolous? "

" When I was a young man never—" Mr. Sylvester started to sing, but the remainder of the words drowned in swift snake-like hisses from Aggie.

" Flossie vows and declares your bed wasn't slept in last night. Where did you sleep? Here? "

" In the garden. Under the catalpa tree. The stars looked terribly big. Like big white bull daisies—"

" It's perfectly obvious you slept here," Aggie said. " You sleep here, yet the child isn't yours. Either way it's disgusting."

" Don't talk about it," Ella said. " Don't talk about it. It's all too terrible to talk about. Oh, I feel so sick—"

" If you were a hedgehog, Kitty," Fred said, with sudden, gentle sobriety, " Ella would pray for you. Or am I being flippant? "

Nobody had anything to say to this, but a moment later Fred was aware of a strange new sound. It was the sound of the straw hat falling to the floor. He turned sharply in the direction of it to discover the girl flopped on the sofa, her head in her hands, weeping.

Without a word he went over to her, put his arms completely round her, and held her quietly against him. As he pressed his face against the mass of her long red hair he had sense enough to realise that the last thing she wanted was words. He had heard her laugh so often and so much that now the sound of her weeping was like a blow. It stunned him into a groping daze.

When he came to himself again it was to realise that Aggie, Ella, and Flossie had gone. Mr. Sylvester and Joey were asleep

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in the cage and on the supper table the candles were burning down.

When he spoke at last it was in a whisper.

"You said you were going to tell me something earlier on."

"Yes." She was not weeping now. "I had a letter this morning."

"A letter?"

"From Micky."

"Who's Micky?"

"He's the one—you know, down in Plymouth. You remember."

Fred remembered. In the act of remembering, his thoughts retracted. He sat apart from her, staring sightlessly at the candles. With a curious air of resigned gentleness, almost in its own way dedicated, he sat like a boy waiting to be told the details of a coming punishment.

A moment later she drew him back to her.

"Hold me again, Fred," she said. With bemused obedience Fred put his arms round her again and pressed his face against her hair. "It's for the last time. I'll be going down to Micky as soon as I can raise the fare."

"I see," Fred said. "I understand."

Two days later he saw her off on the train. At the last moment, before leaving the garden, he had it in his mind to pick her a bunch of flowers. Then he decided against it. Three hundred miles was a long way and you could hardly hope they'd survive.

At the station, just before the train came in, she put her arms on his shoulders to kiss him good-bye. He half turned his face away, shy of other passengers, but she drew him back again and kissed him for some seconds full on the lips, openly.

The owner of a drapery store in the town, standing at a window of the incoming train, saw it all, as he told his wife that lunch-time, as clear as daylight.

"It must be right about Fred Tomlinson and that girl," he told her. "There they were. Clear as daylight. As near as I am to you. Kissing good-bye."

Finally, from the train window, the girl kissed him once more and said, "Thanks again for everything, Fred. Thanks for helping with the fare. Especially that. I'll send it back."

"Never speak to you again if you do," Fred said. "Just write. That's all."

"I'll write," she said. "Good-bye now." The train began moving away and suddenly she was laughing again in her old infectious fashion. "My love to William and Francis and Joey and Mr. Sylvester. Don't forget."

"I won't forget," Fred said. "Good-bye."

He stood for some time longer waving his hand, trying to overcome the old twisting notion that his heart had stopped beating. The girl was waving too and it was only when the arches of a bridge finally hid the train from sight that he stopped waving, turned, and walked away.

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A week later, as September came in, he started to gather the first of the apples from the orchard. It would take him more than a month to finish them all and every day he carried them up in boxes and skips to the loft, as he always did, to store. The scent of them, continual and sweet, filled the room as he sat there in the evenings, sometimes listening to an odd record or two the girl had left behind, sometimes talking to Joey and Mr. Sylvester.

"What do you want if you don't want love?" Mr. Sylvester asked from time to time; and sometimes Joey sang, "Possess me, possess me."

The girls didn't speak to him now. He had started to live entirely in the stable loft, alone, apart from them. It was quite comfortable, sleeping in the same bed the girl had used, and now he had bought himself a new oilstove to keep the place warm.

By the middle of October the apples, all of them early that year, were finished and presently he got into the habit of taking William for gentle walks in the orchard on fine afternoons, before the full fall of leaves, the colder nights, and the long sleep of winter.

And now and then he also had an idea for a message and sent it out by Francis, the jackdaw, half hoping for an answer.

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SOLUTIONS to CRICKET ON THE HEARTH on page 82

1. *An over in which no runs are scored but during which a wicket or wickets fall.*
2. *Hon. L. H. Tennyson.*
3. *The Duke of Wellington in* 1841.
4. 1729.
5. *a. William Blake; b. Hubert Phillip.*
6. 1845.
7. *Australia,* 1884–85.
8. *J. M. Barrie.*
9. *b.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Schoolmaster.* 9, *Italian.* 10, *Glisten.* 11, *Doses.* 12, *Troutling.* 13, *Intermarry.* 18, *Nip.* 19, *Mug.* 20, *Sweepstake.* 25, *Soup-ladle.* 26, *Wench.* 27, *Free air.* 28, *Glacial.* 29, *Nevertheless.*

Down. 1, *Swindling.* 2, *Headship.* 3, *Omits.* 4, *Minster.* 5, *Signora.* 6, *Evictor.* 7, *Attic.* 8, *Snug.* 14, *Eye.* 15, *Map.* 16, *Rot.* 17, *Eggshells.* 19, *Meantime.* 21, *Welfare.* 22, *Endorse.* 23, *Sleight.* 24, *Lutes.* 25, *Soft.* 26, *Whale.*

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 143

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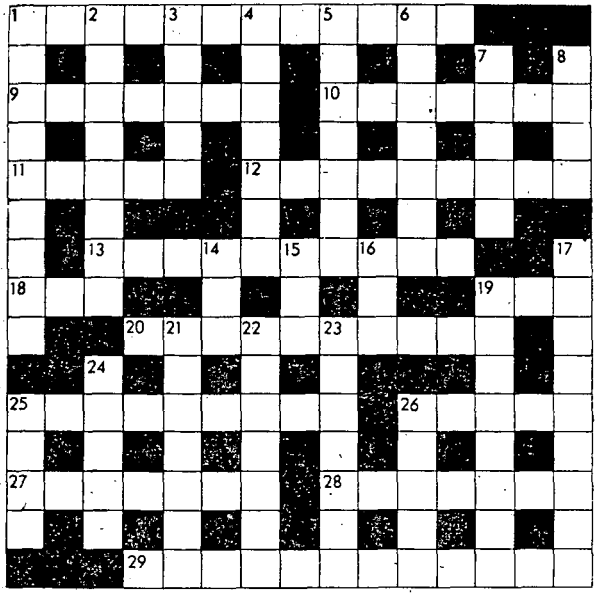

CLUES

Across

1 He's absorbed in—the classroom (12).

9 Farcical straw hat ? (7).

10 Gee ! Listen and shine (7).

11 Does with a shilling for potions (5).

12 Fish on the heather? No, its baby (9).

13 Wed kin, in intermission maybe (10).

18 Short snort goes before tuck (3).

19 Sticky reverse for dupe (3).

20 Long oars grab lottery (10).

25 It's often in stock (4-5).

26 Desdemona was an ill-starred one (5).

27 Inflationary measure, gratis (4, 3).

28 Ice-cold, but not in Alex (7).

29 The learner's always in loch, for all that (12).

Down

1 Wind in catapult ? Cheating ! (9).

2 Admiral's vessel ? No, I's ambition (8).

3 Leaves out—but not in spring (5).

4 More than man in cathedral (7).

5 The Woman of Rome? (7).

6 All vice and rot he expels tenant (7).

7 Room at the Top ? (5).

8 Irish bar sounds cosy (4).

14 Palindromic organ (3).

15 Betjeman's girl, charted backwards (3).

16 "To lie in cold obstruction and to —" (Shakespeare) (3).

17 Fired by rook rifles, perhaps ? (9).

19 For the moment, like Greenwich (8).

21 This State is ours (7).

22 Approve but finish sore twisted (7).

23 Cunning as the French come in sight (7).

24 They suffer from rifts (5).

25 Like roes, or currency (4).

26 Marine mammal in narwhal egg (5).

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